

A farmer had a team of horses in which one horse consistently worked harder than the others. The farmer said, "They're all willin' horses. The one's willin' to pull, and the rest are willin' to let him."

Sadly, that's how it is in many churches. Everybody is willing: a few are willing to serve and the rest are willing to let them.

This morning, I want to talk to you about serving the Lord, specifically in the role of deacon as we are in the need for more deacons. I want to tell you that preparing this message has been a roller coaster ride of highs and lows – moments of high confidence coupled with low periods of uncertainty as I strive to present a message that is biblically accurate – irrespective of any preconceived ideas on my part or any church traditions I have grown up under. I had to let it all go, so to speak, and I ask you to do the same so we can look at this from a purely biblical perspective.

In the New Testament, there are only two biblical offices identified within the local church – elders and deacons. The term “elder” can be translated as “overseer” or “shepherd” or “pastor” and in this church, I serve that spiritual leadership role of an elder, and in the future, I hope to add more elders to our church as well.

Unlike the elder, the term "deacon" (*diakonos*) is translated to mean “servant” and the origin of this office comes from **Acts 6** – so that's where I want to start this morning. Turn to **Acts 6**, beginning with **verse 1**.

¹Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. ²So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Luke tells us that in this early church, a problem arose when the Greek-speaking Jews felt that their widows were being neglected in favor of the native Jews, and as a result, it impacted the unity of the church and it was distracting to the apostles who needed to focus on their ministry of prayer and the preaching of God's Word.

The problem was brought to the apostles, who instructed the congregation to choose from among themselves seven men to address these concerns and to meet the practical and material needs of those in the church. And although these men

were not called *deacons* here, from these men, the office of deacon was created. They weren't elders, they had no governing duties, they weren't a board of directors – they were charged with taking on the responsibility of providing servant leadership for the caring ministry of the church. This was their biblical role.

Now later over time, deacons also visited the sick and those held in prison, and they developed family ministry plans to provide care to those in the congregation. And if they were given authority by the elders, they carried out other tasks such as performing baptisms and administering the Lord's Supper.

So, this caring ministry or what we might call “in-reach” was the intended biblical purpose for the deacon; however, it is important to point out that some of these original deacons were also able to serve the Lord in other ways which were more spiritual in nature.

For example, in **Acts 6:8** we are told, “**And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.**” Obviously, Stephen was a man of spiritual power, and we can conclude that he did more than just serve food to widows. And in **Acts 8:4-7**, we learn that Philip was also a gifted evangelist.

I bring this up because we should be careful not to “pigeon hole” a deacon just because they are a deacon. Whether a deacon or not, all of us in the body of Christ – all of us, are expected to use our spiritual gifts and God-given talents and abilities and resources to love and serve one another.

Okay, we talked about the role of a deacon which is to provide servant leadership in the caring ministry of the church – now let's talk about the biblical qualifications of a deacon.

If you noticed in **Acts 6**, some general qualifications for the office of deacon were given to the church. Those who were chosen as deacons were to have a **good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom** – in other words, deacons were well-known for their character – it was readily apparent that God was working in their lives, and they knew how to apply the truth of God's word to certain situations.

These seven men were recognized by the early church as being both spiritually minded and practically minded – it was obvious to the congregation, and likewise, our role as a church is to simply recognize one's calling by God to serve in this role. In reality, we are not appointing anyone; we are simply recognizing God's calling in a person's life to serve in the role of deacon.

Although **Acts 6** gives us a few general qualifications, it is **1 Timothy 3** that really expounds on this subject and is used as the primary biblical source of qualifications for the office of deacon. So, let's move to **1 Timothy 3**, beginning with **verse 8**.

⁸Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. ¹¹Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

¹²Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. ¹³For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

In **1 Timothy 3**, the qualifications are spelled out for both the elder, which I did not read, and the deacon – and they are similar, but not the same. For example, the elder is required to be “**able to teach**,” whereas the deacon does not have that expectation, although they could still teach. The differences in the title and the differences in the qualifications mean that the two offices are distinct from each other; even though, they minister together and both are essential in carrying out the ministry of the church. And this brings up an important point.

It would be a terrible mistake to view one office as more important or prestigious than the other. That's pride talking. That's foolishness. This is about obedience to one's calling by God to serve, rather than one's status in the church. **Does that make sense?**

Okay, let's dig into this a little deeper beginning with **verse 8**.

⁸Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, ⁹but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

There are several qualifications listed in these two verses, so let's go through them one by one.

We are told the first qualification for a deacon is that they should be dignified – meaning they should be worthy of respect – a man of Christian character worth imitating. In essence, a deacon should possess an inner character or quality about them that calls for respect from the people they serve.

In **verse 8**, we are also told that a deacon is not to be **double-tongued** – in other words, they are believable – you can depend on what he says – they say what they mean and they mean what they say. And in the same vein, they don't say one thing to one person and say something different to another about the same subject. They are straightforward people who tell the truth – in love.

Like an elder, the deacon must not to be **addicted to much wine**, and in my opinion, that qualification would apply to any alcoholic or controlled substance. Now, abstinence is not the idea presented here by Paul – rather it's a question of excess. A deacon should not be one who allows these kinds of substances to negatively influence their life or the lives of others.

Deacons are not to be **fond of sordid gain**. **What in the world does that mean?** The priorities of a deacon are not to be centered on the accumulation of wealth – the love of money. In their financial dealings, whether personal or business, a deacon cannot be one who uses unethical or dishonest tactics to make their money.

In **verse 9**, Paul focuses on a deacon's grounding in the Christian faith and their understanding of the truth of God's word – **holding to the mystery of the faith**.

For a deacon, there needs to be a spiritual depth in their faith, more specifically, they should be individuals who understand and hold firm to the truths of the Bible.

The new pastor was asked to teach a boys' Sunday school class in the absence of the regular teacher. He decided to see what they had learned, so he asked who knocked down the walls of Jericho. All the boys denied having done it, and the pastor was surprised by their lack of knowledge.

At the next deacons' meeting the pastor told about the experience. "Not one of them knows who knocked down the walls of Jericho," he said. The deacons were silent until finally the Chairman of Deacons spoke up and said, "Pastor, this appears to be bothering you a lot. But I've known all those boys since they were born and they're good boys. If they said they didn't knock down the walls, I believe them. Let's just take some money from the building fund, fix those walls, and let it go at that."

If you aren't laughing – I am a little concerned and we should talk later. The deacon, just like the pastor, should be a student of the Bible – not necessarily an expert, but a student – they should be consistently digging in it because there is still so much to learn, and as they learn, the truth of God's word should be

reflected in their decisions and in their daily lives **with a clear conscience** – meaning the deacon should practice what they preach.

¹⁰ These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.

This is similar to what we read in **Acts 6**. A deacon demonstrates their fitness for the office by their Christian walk – their normal conduct in life. This is the test. Their calling is recognized over time through the ordinary activities they are already exhibiting in their lives. Again, it should be obvious to the church.

Paul said deacons are to be **beyond reproach**. **Who of us is beyond reproach? Who of us is blameless?** Not a single one of us. Paul was not suggesting perfection here – and thank God for that or none of us would be serving in any capacity. I think what Paul is talking about is that there should be no legitimate grounds for charges or public accusations brought against a deacon by others. That makes sense as it could weaken the testimony of the entire church.

¹¹ Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

Okay, let's first talk about the four qualities of these women, then we will jump into the deep end of the pool and try to figure out who these women actually are.

First, these women are to be **dignified**, worthy of respect, which is the same quality used to describe the men back in **verse 8**.

Secondly, they are not to be **malicious gossips**. Literally, they are not to be "she-devils." I've met a few "she-devils" in my time. This refers to women who are in the practice of sharing juicy tidbits of private information to undermine and wreck the reputation of others. They are gossips. Now we know that men gossip as well, but this may be focused on women because, to their credit, women tend to be more relationship-oriented than men and frankly, they are generally easier to talk to.

The third qualification for women is that they be **temperate**, which is the same quality mentioned for elders. **What does that mean?** They are to be clearheaded and able to make sound judgments. They need to avoid the emotional extremes.

Lastly, these women are to be **faithful in all things**. In other words, they are to be responsible and trustworthy. These women must be counted on to follow through on their assigned tasks.

Now, for the big question. Who are these women that Paul is talking about? Was he referring to a woman such as Phoebe in **Romans 16:1** whom Paul called a *deacon*, or was he referring to the wives of male deacons? I will tell you that there is a lot of support for either interpretation – so what do we do?

I thought it best to work through this together with you, to consider these two main questions: Is Paul talking about wives of male deacons or is he saying a woman can be a deacon?

In my opinion, the primary point that supports the view that Paul is only talking about the wives of male deacons, is the placement of this verse in our passage. If you notice, **verse 11** is sandwiched between **verses 10** and **12** – both of which refer specifically to male deacons, so for consistency sake, it would make sense that **verse 11** is referring to the wives of these male deacons.

Secondly, it is also suggested that Paul is talking about the wives of male deacons because a man's leadership in the home will likely be reflected in the behavior of his wife, plus it is very difficult for a married man to perform the role of deacon without the support of his wife.

I must admit that these are really good solid points and I could stop right there, but to be thorough and biblically open-minded, there are some equally good points to be made that Paul is actually referring to women deacons.

As I mentioned earlier, Phoebe was called a deacon by Paul, but some scholars would counter that the Greek word *deacon* is interchangeable with the word *servant* – and that is correct. Paul could be calling her a deacon or a servant of the church, so, I consider that a wash so to speak. It doesn't really give us any clarity.

But here is a good question. If Paul was only talking about the wives of male deacons and how they behave, why didn't Paul also provide similar qualifications for the wives of the elders? He doesn't say a thing about the wives of elders. Wouldn't these qualities be just as important or more important for an elder's wife? Why focus on the wives of deacons but not on the wives of elders? It's strange and his silence gives me reason for pause and consideration that Paul is possibly talking about women deacons.

I do give a lot of weight to the point that **verse 11** is sandwiched between **verses 10** and **12**, which both focus on male deacons. If Paul would have created a separate section for women, this would be a lot easier for us to figure out. But some have suggested that Paul did do this – and let me explain. When Paul

transitioned from the subject of elders to deacons in **verse 8**, he used the word “*likewise*” to indicate a new subject was being started, and then if you notice in **verse 11**, Paul does it here as well, **Women must *likewise***.

Now on a side note, your Bible translation may say *wives* leaving you to wonder why I am so confused, but there is no specific Greek word for *wives*. Paul actually uses the Greek word *gyne* which is the general term for *women* that is occasionally translated as *wives*.

Well, why didn't Paul use the word *deaconess*, as that would surely make it easier? That would have made it easier for everybody, but there is no specific Greek word for *deaconess* either. That's why Phoebe was called a deacon or a servant.

Here is a key for me and it comes from **1 Timothy 2:12**, the previous chapter, where Paul says that in a church setting, a woman should not **exercise authority over a man**. This has nothing to do with skills or abilities nor is it about superiority – so let's not go there. Men and women are equal in their being, but they do have different roles when it comes to spiritual leadership in the church.

So in my opinion, as I understand the Bible, since an elder is in a governing role in the church, a woman would not be permitted to serve in that role; however, a deacon, as described in the Bible, is not in a church governing role, and as a result, a woman could then serve as a deacon, and if we are really honest here, you and I know that women in most churches already serve in this capacity without the title.

¹² Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households.

Boy, this is a passage open to a lot of discussion and confusion, and I have wrestled with this one for several years. The Bible tells us the deacon must be the **husband of only one wife** – so this is addressed to deacons who happen to be married. Paul is not saying a deacon must be married; otherwise, Paul could not be a deacon, nor could Jesus for that matter.

In the original language, to be the **husband of only one wife** literally means to be a “one-woman-man” meaning his relationship is exclusive – his love, his affection, and his heart is given to only one woman. The deacon should be sexually pure, not be a womanizer, and have their eyes for only one woman. This is about one's moral character, not about one's marital status.

And in my opinion, in the same vein as alcohol and controlled substances, a deacon should not be under the grip of pornography. On occasion, male deacons do minister to women, so this might be another very prudent reason for female deacons.

Now, some have suggested that this means a deacon cannot be divorced and remarried – but that’s not what it says. There is a Greek word for divorce and it is *aphiemi*. Paul used this word in **1 Corinthians** and he could have used that same word here to settle the matter once and for all, but under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he did not.

Now, some might ask, well what if a prospective deacon has abandoned his wife, ran off with another woman, or has been divorced and remarried five times. Then I would refer to **verse 8**. **Would that individual be worthy of respect?** Likely not.

Verse 12 also tells us that deacons are **good managers of their children and their own households**.

Deacons must also be good managers of their home. Some make the mistake of thinking their work is so important in the church that they are justified in ignoring their families. I made that mistake in the past. I was a faithful deacon, a chairman of deacons, but a crappy husband and father. Leadership must begin at home, and if a deacon cannot manage and care for their family, they are not qualified to lead in the caring ministry of the church. Don’t allow your church activities to detract from your legitimate family responsibilities.

¹³ For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Brian Harbour, pastor of FBC, Richardson, Texas tells that one Sunday, one of the Associate Pastors met little Susan in the hall following Sunday School. He asked her, “Susan, what did you learn in Sunday School today?” Susan replied, “We learned how to heal the sick and cast out deacons!”

We don’t want to cast out deacons – we need deacons, and there is a reward for deacons who desire to serve and are not simply seeking a title. God remembers their faithful service, even in tasks which some would consider insignificant and menial in nature, and deacons will be rewarded for their service – something not mentioned about elders. For faithful deacons, God will give them greater opportunities to serve, to grow in their faith, and to be more effective in their ministry. **Is God calling you to serve as a deacon?** If so, then trust and obey Him.

Source Material:

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Grace to You – John MacArthur
Authentic Christianity – Ray Stedman