

Deacons

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we come, humbling ourselves before you, waiting to be addressed by you from your word.

Speak to us and by your spirit, work in us so that we might be characterized as a church by the humility and service and sacrifice that this passage calls us to.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen. Today is an exciting day in the life of our church. In September of this year, it will have been two full years since we launched our public services, and today we are finally appointing our first deacons.

For this reason, I'm not going to stay in our series through the book of Jeremiah today, but I'm going to preach instead from 1 Timothy 3, 8-13, which Justin hopefully read for us. And from here, we'll be discussing three things.

First, the requirements for deacons. Second, the roles of deacons. And third, the rewards for deacons. And the main point of this passage really is that the church should appoint Christ-like servants of the church as deacons.

[1 : 22] The early church faced a crisis in 1st century AD. After Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Jerusalem, the church grew exponentially, and it was really a community like no other that existed prior to that point because it was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, and they lived in equality.

They lived in community together, in unity and diversity. But that kind of unity and diversity always creates tensions that more homogenous groups don't have to deal with.

And so that's what we find in Acts 6, 1-7, where this crisis is recorded. The Greek believers raise a complaint to the apostles saying that while the Jewish widows are being taken care of in their daily rations with food, the Greek widows were being neglected.

And so the apostles summoned the whole church, and they say this. 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.

And the apostles are here not downplaying the importance of caring for the poor because, in fact, the task is so weighed and important that people who are of good repute and full of the spirit and wisdom must be appointed to do it.

[2 : 49] But while this is a necessary and important task, the preaching of the word and prayer likewise cannot be neglected. So because of that, because both of those tasks are so important, they had to appoint new leaders in the church.

And many believe that this instance recorded in Acts 6 was the beginning of the diaconate, or the deaconship, the office of deacon. And the word deacon, of course, isn't used here, but the highlighted word serve in verse 2 is this verbal form of the word deacon.

And the pattern established here for the role of deacons fits the description of deacons in other parts of Scripture, as well as the example we see in church history. What they do in the church is they meet a need and they preserve the peace of the church.

So then Acts 6 teaches us that there are two types of ministries, two main types. First is the ministry of the word, and second is the ministry of the table. After the apostles, the ministry of the word was entrusted to the elders of the church, or the overseers of the church, also called that.

And the ministry of the table was entrusted to the deacons of the church. And while ministry of the table, of course, includes care for the poor and the widows, it's, I don't think, strictly limited to that because the reason for the deacons in Acts 6 BC is not merely to meet the need but also to relieve the elders so that they can continue to preach the word and to pray.

[4 : 12] And so because of that, I think anything, and this is how historically church has observed this practice, any ministry that relieves and releases the elders to focus on the ministry of the word and prayer would fit under the category of the deacons' ministry.

And so there are two offices in the church, and only two, and it's the elder, office of elder, and the office of deacon. And we see both of those addressed together in Philippians 1-1, for example. And at the end of Acts 6 in verse 7, we find out what happened as a result of this solution to the problem that faced the crisis that faced the early church.

And it says in Acts 6-7, And 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.

The possible crisis and schism of the church was avoided, and the church continued to grow in unity and in faith, and that's really the hope that we have as we appoint our first deacons as well, that that will be the result that we see in our church.

And so let's take a look first at the requirements for deacons from this passage. Verse 8 says, follow with me, deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

[5 : 32] So first, the deacons must be dignified, meaning they have to be worthy of esteem and respect. Deacons should be people who are not given in their lives to cheap, you know, crass or ignoble things and tendencies, but they should show, they should have the tendency toward good things, noble things and worthy causes.

And secondly, the deacons must not be double-tongued. The word literally means speaking twice. It refers to repeating something that ought not to be repeated.

So, for example, it would include betraying someone's confidence and repeating their secret to someone else. Or secondly, it would also include any form of gossip and slander instead of talking to someone directly about an offense that they have caused or about their faults and flaws.

You talk about it, talk about that person with someone else. You're repeating it where you're not supposed to repeat it. Double-tongued to talk twice. And so deacons, because they're charged with keeping the peace of the church, they are not to be double-tongued because that destroys community.

Third, the deacons must not be addicted to much wine. The phrase literally means to be devoted to much wine. Right? Those who are addicted to alcohol devote themselves to it.

[6 : 50] They spend their fortunes on it. They sacrifice their relationships and their families for it. So to be devoted really means to pay attention to or to occupy oneself with something.

And by definition, that means a Christian cannot be devoted to the things of God and simultaneously be devoted to wine. Being controlled by the Holy Spirit excludes being controlled by wine.

So deacons must not be devoted to wine. Fourth, the deacons must not be greedy for dishonest gain. They must not be people who sell, peddle religion for profit.

Using their office and station for dishonest gain brings shame on Christ and His gospel. So the deacons must not be greedy for dishonest gain. Before I continue, I just want to tell you that this passage is about deacons, but deacons, the qualifications for deacons, really is something that all Christians should aspire to.

It's the characteristic of all godly Christians. So it's applicable to all of us. It's pertinent to all of us. And then verse 9, look with me, continues. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

[7 : 58] The mystery of the faith is referenced to the hidden plan of God from generations past that was revealed fully in Jesus Christ. So in short, the mystery of the faith is the gospel or the good news of Jesus Christ, His saving message.

And that gospel, deacons must grasp firmly and they must hold onto the gospel with a clear conscience. Earlier in chapter 1, verse 19 of the same book, Paul charged Timothy in this way. He said, wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.

So there are people who even though they have faith in the gospel, they go on sinning in spite of it. Unrepentantly, they go on sinning. And as they do that, they make shipwreck of their own faith itself.

And so Paul is saying deacons have to be people who are able to, with a clear conscience, hold the mystery of faith. This doesn't mean that they have to be sinless. That's the case.

[9 : 05] We would have no deacons. But it does mean that the way they live should confirm the gospel rather than contradicted. Their faith in the good news of Jesus Christ must be borne out by the good works that they do in their lives.

And they should be able to hold the mystery of faith without feeling like a fraud and a hypocrite, not being condemned by their own consciences. So deacons have to be able to do with the clear conscience, hold the mystery of faith.

And not only are deacons supposed to meet these character requirements, they must also, according to verse 10, be tested first. Then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

The worthiness of the deacon candidates are proven over time. And I think there's multiple reasons for that. One of them, Paul himself tells us later in chapter 5, verse 24, the sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later.

So because of this, and it's important that the deacons first be tested. And if they prove themselves blameless, they are to be appointed as deacons.

[10 : 14] And this is why in our church we have diaconal interns first. That's the period of testing. And when they have proven themselves blameless, we appoint them as deacons as we're doing today. And the word blameless is a synonym of the word that means above reproach.

That was the character requirement for elders earlier in this chapter. And so that means the deacon's character must be of such quality that they do not bring reproach to Christ and his gospel. The description is pretty straightforward so far, right? And the requirements for deacons is pretty clear from here. But in verse 11, the description takes an unexpected turn.

So look with me in verse 11 of this chapter. Their wives, likewise, must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

So if you are using the English Standard Version ESV, you probably have a footnote next to the word likewise. So look with me if you see the footnote. Follow the footnote down and it will say this, quote, or woman likewise.

[11 : 21] You guys see that? I'm not seeing any, no, if you guys are using ESV. So in Greek, there's one word for both woman and wife, which is why there are translational variations for this verse.

So for example, both the NIV and the NASB translate the word in this verse as woman rather than wives. And so look, so NIV says, in the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

Why does this matter? Because if we translate it as wives, then it's a reference to deacons' wives. But if we translate it as woman, then it most likely refers to woman deacons.

That's why this one translational difference is significant. And faithful teachers of the word have disagreed on this matter throughout church history, so it's not something to be dogmatic about. But I am nevertheless personally convinced that Paul is referring here to woman deacons and not to deacons' wives.

And here are the reasons why. First, there is no possessive pronoun there in the text as there is in ESV. It just says, likewise woman.

[12 : 31] It doesn't say their woman or their wives. If the possessive pronoun was there, that would be very clear that it's referring to wives, but it's not there in the Greek. Second, due to the ambiguity of the generic Greek word for woman, whenever scripture authors use the word to mean wife, they provide contextual clues, such as mentioning their husbands or including modifiers like their own wives, that's what invariably happens throughout scripture.

for example, next verse, verse 12, when Paul says that a deacon must be a one-woman man, that's clearly a reference to a one-wife husband, right? So it's saying that the husband must be faithful to one wife.

But verse 11 doesn't have those contextual clues. It simply says woman. And so I think as it is translated in other parts of scripture, I think it's more natural to translate it as woman.

And then third, the transitional word likewise suggests that Paul is introducing a new subset category here in verse 11 because he used the word likewise earlier when he was transitioning from a description of elders in verses 1 to 7 to deacons in verse 8 and he makes the same transition

in verse 11 and says likewise, woman.

So I think it's probably not referring to their wives but to another subset category of the offices that he's dealing with. And fifth, the character qualities required of these women fit what we would expect of woman deacons but not necessarily what we would expect of deacons' wives.

[14:02] Let me explain. Whenever scripture mentions the character traits of godly wives, for example, in Ephesians 5, 22 to 24, Colossians 3, 18, 1 Timothy 2, 15, 1 Peter 3, whenever it mentions wives and their godly traits, it refers directly to their wifely duty to their husbands and commends how they submit to their husbands and how they perform their duties in the home.

But those kinds of traits and characteristics are not mentioned here at all when it's referring to the deacons' wives if it's referring to them. Instead, the description is almost identical to the requirements for male deacons given in verses 8 to 9.

So compare the two with me. Both are called to be dignified, verse 8, verse 11. They're called to be not double-tongued in verse 8, which parallels not slanderers in verse 11.

Male deacons are called to be not addicted to much wine in verse 8, that parallels the need to be sober-minded in verse 11. And holding the mystery of faith with the clear conscience in verse 9, parallels being faithful in all things in verse 11.

So I think these parallels are there intentionally to signal to us that it's not referring to the deacons' wives but to women deacons just as it referred to male deacons.

[15:21] And sixth, and this is my last reason that I'm going to give for why I'm convinced of this, there's confirmation from elsewhere in Scripture that there were women deacons in the church. In Romans 16.1, it says, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Centria.

The word servant, there is the exact same word that is translated as deacon. And of course, it could mean generically servant, but I don't think that's likely and most translators agree that that's not what it's referring to because of the description.

Not just a servant, but a servant of the church at Centria, which seems to be signaling an official role, a representative role, a recognized role within the church. That's why NIV translates it, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Centria.

And historical evidence confirms the existence of deacons. Pliny the Younger was a Roman magistrate in the interim, and he corresponded with Emperor Trojan.

And in one of his letters, he boasts about how he tortured and interrogated two Christian women who are called deaconesses. And my interpretation of this is not novel or creative.

[16:40] If I ever teach you anything that is novel, that's new, that no one in the church has ever taught in the past, I want you guys to call me out on it and challenge me because I don't ever want to do that. This is something that faithful exegetes of scripture and some of the most reliable church fathers have said.

This is what this passage in fact means. John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Theodoric, one of my favorites of the church fathers, they all argue that 1 Timothy 3.11 is a reference to women deacons, not to deacons' wives.

And other church fathers like Origen, Epiphanes, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the council of Nicaea, the canons of the council of Nicaea in 3.25, they took the existence of deaconess is for granted.

And some of the main reasons I think is given in a third century church manual called the teaching or the didascalia of the apostles and it says this, Appoint a woman for the ministry of women for there are homes to which you cannot send a male deacon to their woman on account of the heathen but you may send the deaconess.

Also in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required. This is a third century church manual. So I think for these reasons I'm very convinced that this is referring to women deacons and that's why we are appointing women deacons as well.

[18:01] Now turn with me back to verse 12. That was kind of a long excursus on explaining that. Whenever scripture lists the qualifications for church officers it always addresses both their personal character and secondly their family life as a candidate.

Paul follows the same pattern here. So having addressed the personal character of male deacons in verses 8 to 10 and having addressed the personal character of female deacons in verse 11 Paul now turns to address the family life of deacons.

And here he focuses particularly on the male deacons because they as heads of their respective households they had a particular responsibility to the home and the way they managed their homes had to be taken into account before their appointment.

So Paul says in verse 12 let deacons each be the husband of one wife managing their children and their own households well. These qualifications are the same as the ones that were given to elders earlier in this chapter and in Titus 1.

and the phrase husband of one wife is literally like I said before one woman man. A deacon must be a one woman man. This doesn't mean that he has to be married it just means that if he is married that he must be a one woman kind of man.

[19 : 17] Obviously this excludes polygamy but the standard is much higher than that. He must be a husband that is faithful and devoted to his wife. A man who has eyes and heart for one woman only.

If you want a more detailed explanation of that phrase you could refer back to my sermon in Titus 1 from a few weeks ago because that's all I'm going to say for that part for now. And the male deacons must also give evidence of managing their children and their own households well. And the rationale behind this qualification is that married elder is called to lead two families. His personal family and God's family. And the former his leading of his own family functions as the testing ground for how he will do in God's family.

Because if the man cannot even manage his own family which he has had I mean basically a family that he has had charge of from the very beginning of the life of the family and with whom he even shares natural biological kinship if he can't even manage that family how will he manage God's family which is far more numerous and more diverse and with whom there is neither a natural kinship bond nor a legal right how can you manage that kind of family well if you can't even manage your own family well when you have everything else going for you.

That's the idea. And so these are the requirements for deacons. And notice that all the requirements here deal with the person's character and not with the person's competence.

[20 : 50] the world values intelligence skill and competence far more than they do personal character and that's precisely why we see moral lapses abuses and scandals at all levels of corporations and governments.

But that must not be the case with the church as it has been in the past. We live in a city that has an overabundance of human resources and to tell you the truth I stopped being impressed by smart and competent people a long long time ago.

Smart people are a dime and a dozen. They're common. There's a lot of smart people in this world. Skilled people are a dime a dozen. You know what's really rare?

Humble people. Godly people. people who are dignified not double-tongued sober-minded faithful in all things.

That's rare. And as Christians let's wear those characteristics as the badge of our honor and not conform to ourselves to the value systems of this world.

[22 : 08] And I want to speak directly to the deacon Candace for a moment. How you care how you care for and lead the people in your respective ministry teams is far more important than what you are able to get them to do.

Your character as a deacon is far more important for the advancement of the gospel than your competence and I believe that's the implication of this passage. And this is why our deacons although they are very gifted in many ways they're not necessarily the ones that are most gifted at everything that they do.

What's been more important and prominent in our consideration of deacons has been their demonstration of Christ-like servanthood. So with that proper emphasis on the requirements for deacons let's now turn to the second point the roles of deacons.

The scripture actually doesn't tell us too much about the roles of deacons what they do because it's more focused on who they are what they should be like rather than on what they do.

So we kind of have to read between the lines a little bit but I think it's clearly here in the text. And the first character qualification for deacons well he gave the character qualification for elders in verses 1-7 and the deacons in verses 8-13 and they're very similar but by comparing the two lists and see where they differ we can figure out what the distinct roles of deacons are.

[23 : 34] And first of course is the title an elder is called the overseer referring to his leadership and oversight over the church. The word deacon on the other hand means servant.

It points to ministries of service. As H.B. Charles Jr. the pastor of Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church puts it elders serve by leading deacons lead by serving.

It's a little bit you guys follow this elders serve by leading deacons lead by serving. It's a very helpful and memorable way to distinguish the roles of elders and deacons. Elders serve the church through their leadership and the deacons lead the church through their service.

And a deacon according to verse 9 must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience and that's similar to the description of elders in Titus 1-9 which must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught but then for an elder there's also an added description.

It says in addition to holding firmly to the trustworthy word as taught they have to be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

[24 : 47] That's a key difference between an elder and a deacon. In 1 Timothy 3 we see this as well. Look with me go back a little bit on your Bible and go to verse 2 of chapter 3 because if you look through the list toward the end of verse 2 it tells us that an elder has to be able to teach and that's not a requirement for deacons.

Now this doesn't mean that all elders teach with regularity it seems clear that they didn't according to 1 Timothy 5 17 but all elders have to be able to teach and this doesn't mean that all deacons no deacon is able to teach but it means that deacons are not required to be able to teach in order to be a deacon and so that's a key difference so we could put it this way a deacon must hold firm to the trustworthy word and an elder must be able to teach the trustworthy word so holding the word and trusting the word and preaching the word or teaching the word that's the key difference between the role of an elder and a deacon and as we saw from act 6 in the beginning the deacons were appointed to meet various needs ministry needs that arise as the church grows so that the elders can continue to pray and to preach the word and so those two primary roles of ministry to the word and ministry to the table is I think what Peter has in mind when he says in 1 Peter 4 as each has received a gift use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace whoever speaks as one who speaks oracles of God whoever serves as one who serves by the strength that God supplies in order that in everything

God may be glorified through Jesus Christ there are several places in scripture that list the spiritual gifts this is one of them but this is the briefest among them all and I think it's because Peter is summarizing and he's listing two gifts that are really representative of all the gifts in the church because broadly speaking we could classify every single spiritual gift either as a speaking gift or as a serving gift and I think that's the representative leaders in those roles are the elders and deacons respectively now that's the role of deacons now that brings us to the final point and the deacon candidates are particularly excited about this one the rewards for deacons sorry to break it to you but there will be no financial compensation well we may get you a gift card or something because we love you but there will be no there's no salary but there's far better rewards look at verse 13 with me notice the logical connection between this and the preceding verses it says for those who serve well so this is the reason why the character requirements are non-negotiable because it's only those who exemplify such character in their service who will experience these rewards four those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in

Christ Jesus so a deacon gains two things first they gain a good standing for themselves second they gain a great confidence in Christ first in their relation to the church deacons gain a good standing because by serving faithfully they win the respect and appreciation of the church deaconship is no menial task it is an honorable office and we rightly respect and appreciate faithful deacons and the second in their relation to God deacons gain a great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus faithful service rendered to the church strengthens the deacons faith in Christ this is because by serving humbly the deacons imitate and grow more like Christ who came not to be served but to serve in Matthew 20 25 to 28 when his disciples were bickering among themselves about who among them is the greatest I'm the greatest disciple

I will sit at the right hand of God they're bickering in this way and Jesus said to them this you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them and their great ones exercised authority over them it shall not be so among you but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave even as the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many right Christ is the son of God he was a darling of heaven the delight of the father in eternity past yet he became a son of man so he could

save us from our sins Jesus of all people deserved honor of all people he deserved glory to have everyone bow down before him wherever he goes to put the red carpet under him wherever he goes to serve him with all their life that's what he deserves and he humbled himself and chose the shame of the cross he died for our sins so that we could live and have eternal life

[30 : 20] Jesus lowered himself to the lowest place that any human being has ever gone so that he could lift us up to glory with God Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many so let me ask you do you have a desire to be great because Jesus said whoever would be great among you must be your servant the servant again same word as deacon the people of this world seek to rule rather than to serve to lift themselves up rather than to humble themselves to be first rather than last but as Christians we are called to follow a different pattern set by the Lord Jesus Christ to serve rather than to be served and deacons are those in the church who are recognized by the church for their Christ like servanthood and given particular responsibilities for a great privilege by humbling yourselves and by serving the church you get to be a picture of Christ to the church and picture of Christ to the watching world as you humble yourselves and as you serve the church sacrificially you give off the aroma of Christ and you give people a taste of the sweetness of the humble savior that we have become the one little your hand through the whole and their the enemy puts their system