

“Those Who Serve Well as Deacons” (1 Timothy 3:8–13)

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When you watch something, whether it’s a movie, a game of football, or an orchestra play, do you ever think about how many people it takes to put on a large production? When we’re watching a movie, we tend to focus on the actors. We may think about the director, particularly if it’s a famous director. But we probably don’t think about those who are operating the cameras, those who design the lighting, those who are in charge of costumes, the makeup artists, or the editors. We probably don’t think about the key grip, because we’re not quite sure what that person does. We might not even think about the screenwriter. But it takes all those people and many more to make a movie. Each role is important, even if all the roles aren’t visible to the audience.

The same is true of a football game. We tend to focus on the star players, like the quarterback, the running back, and the wide receivers. But a football team needs all kinds of players, like offensive lineman, and the guy who holds the ball for the kicker. And beyond the players, you need coaches and trainers. And you need groundskeepers, ticket sellers, and people who maintain stadiums. Tom Brady may be the star of the Patriots, but he wouldn’t do well without offensive linemen blocking for him, and he couldn’t play if nobody built stadiums, or scheduled games.

The same thing is true of a symphony orchestra. If you go to Symphony Hall to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra perform, you may focus on the conductor or the soloists. But all the players are important. They all play different parts, different roles. And then there is the stage manager and the stage hands, who arrange the chairs on the stage. There are people who sell tickets and take tickets and clean up the building. All are important.

That’s the way it is in the church. For a church to be a healthy, faithful church, there need to be many people involved, all of whom are important. And these people will play different roles. Some will lead and teach. But most will serve in different ways. These roles aren’t less important, they’re just different.

Today, we’re going to talk about the role of the deacon in the church. We’ll do this by looking at 1 Timothy 3:8–13. But before we do that, I want to say this: We are looking at the letter of 1 Timothy, a book of the Bible written by the apostle Paul to his younger associate, a

man named Timothy. We've been looking at some other passages in the Bible that deal with how the church should run. We're doing this because we want to make sure that we are a healthy, faithful church.

There are many churches that are more or less faithful in their message. They teach people about Jesus. They tell people who God is, how to have a relationship with God, and how to live a life that is pleasing to God. But many churches ignore what the Bible says about how a church should be organized or how a church should do things. But we can't do this. We can't just take the message of Jesus and separate it from Jesus' commands regarding his church. He has designed his church to function in a certain way, the best way. And we would be wise to pay attention to what Jesus has revealed to us through his prophets and apostles. That's why we're spending so much time on this issue.

So, with that being said, we're going to look at what Paul says about deacons. Let's read 1 Timothy 3:8–13:

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ 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.¹

Today, I want to ask and answer three questions about deacons. The first question is: What are deacons? Before I even begin to answer that question, I want to make a quick statement. I want you to forget everything you think you may know about deacons. This morning, I'm going to teach what the Bible teaches about deacons. Ideally, what the Bible says about deacons would match up with our understanding of what a deacon is. But that's not the case. So, I'm going to teach what the Bible teaches. My hope is that this church can line up more fully with what the Bible says.

This passage really doesn't tell us much about what deacons are. Here, Paul lists the qualities of the deacons. He doesn't define "deacon" for us. But if we pay close attention, there are some clues as to what a deacon is. In the previous passage in 1 Timothy, Paul talks about

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

overseers, or pastors. He says that they must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Paul doesn’t say that about deacons, so deacons don’t need to be teachers. But a lot of the other things that Paul says here apply to pastors as well, so that doesn’t tell us a lot.

But one of the main things that tells us about what a deacon is, is the very word for this office. The New Testament was written in Greek, and most of the time translations into English are very accurate and easy enough to understand. But there are times when some Greek words are transliterated, probably because of traditions. The word “deacon” in Greek is δίακονος. You can hear how that sounds a lot like our English word. The word actually means “servant.” It can be used to refer to people who wait on tables. So, deacons are servants. It would probably be better for this word to be translated that way in our Bibles. But I suppose it’s not because the translators want us to know that these aren’t just any servants, but the church’s officially recognized servants.

Just as the words “overseer” and “shepherd” tell us a lot about that office, the word “servant” tells us a lot about what a deacon is. But if we’re going to understand more about what kind of a servant a deacon is, we have to look at other passages in the New Testament.

The problem is that the word “deacon,” when used of an official office, doesn’t appear much at all in the New Testament. At the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). Notice how he addresses the whole congregation and then specifies the two offices of the church: overseers and deacons. But that doesn’t tell us a lot. And, really, that’s the only other time that the word “deacon” appears in our Bibles. The Greek word δίακονος does appear some other times, but it often refers to a servant of some kind or other, not an official servant of the church.

To understand what a deacon is, we have to look at another passage, Acts 6. This passage discusses what is probably the origin of the diaconate. If you’re not familiar with the book of Acts, it tells the story of the early church, beginning with Jesus’ ascension to heaven after he died and rose from the grave. The early chapters tell about the Holy Spirit, the third Person of God, being poured out on the church and the disciples preaching a message about Jesus in Jerusalem. But Christianity is more than just preaching. Let’s read Acts 6:1–7:

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word

of God to serve tables. ³ 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. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

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.

We’re told that the disciples—another name for Christians, which means “students” or “followers”—were growing in number. But there was a problem. The church was taking care of widows, but only some widows, the ones who were regarded as Hebrews, who spoke Aramaic. The Hellenists were the Jews who spoke Greek, who grew up in places outside of Palestine, and who had moved to Jerusalem later in life. Their widows weren’t being taken care of. They weren’t receiving food. So, “the twelve,” the apostles, the leaders of the church, come up with a solution. First, they say, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” The verb that is translated “to serve” is διακονεῖν, which is related to the Greek word for “deacon.” The job of the apostles was to preach the word of God, not to take care of these physical problems. They needed someone else to take care of the widows. So, they told the people to pick seven men who had a good reputation, who were full of the Holy Spirit, and who were wise. The people picked seven men, and the apostles approved of their choices and laid hands on them, which means they set them apart for this service.

This division of labor allowed the apostles to focus on “prayer and . . . the ministry of the word.” Since these seven men made sure the Greek widows were fed, the apostles didn’t have to worry about that, and they could focus on the task that Jesus gave them, which was to tell people about Jesus. And this division of labor is very similar to what we find with overseers/pastors and deacons. Pastors preach and teach the Bible, they help people grow in faith, and the lead. But overseeing and leading doesn’t mean they can and should do all the work. Deacons are servants who take care of physical needs.

I don’t think it’s an accident that when men are chosen to take care of the widows, freeing the apostles up to do the work of praying and preaching, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” A healthy church that follows God’s design will see to the spiritual and physical needs of the congregation. Deacons are not

pastors/shepherds/elders/overseers. They aren't board members who make decisions. They're not leaders. They are servants.

That is what the Bible teaches. And it's a practical teaching. But right now, we don't have this teaching reflected in our church. We do have two deacons, two godly men who have been a great help to me. But they're really functioning more like elders. They both do some "deacon-type things." Jim spends hours mowing the lawn. Dean serves as an usher and opens and later locks the doors. But I suspect that if we reform the church according to the Bible, they will serve as elders, not deacons. Yet we do need deacons to do physical things. That would free me up to do what I need to do as a pastor. If there are physical things that need taking care of in the building or on the grounds, I should be able to contact a deacon to do those things. If we have people who need rides to church, who need help paying bills, or who need physical tasks done because they can't do them, there should be deacons to meet those needs.

So, deacons are servants, not assistant pastors or even assistants to the pastor. They are not junior overseers or shepherds. But that doesn't make them less valuable. The church needs servants. And I hope that our by-laws will change to reflect what the Bible teaches. Right now, our by-laws say that deacons should "watch over and pray for the spiritual life of the church." Anyone can pray for the spiritual life of the church, but the language of "watch over" should be reserved only for pastors. The by-laws also state that deacons should serve as "overseeing . . . members of all committees and boards." The language of "overseeing" should be reserved for overseers. This needs to be changed. We need a plurality of overseers/elders/pastors and a plurality of deacons. Having a deacon serve as a pastor or a pastor serve as a deacon is like having Tom Brady serve as a receiver. And if you watched the last Super Bowl, you know that didn't work out so well.

The second question I want to ask and answer is: Who can be deacons? That's what Paul addresses in 1 Timothy. Let's look again at today's passage. He says that deacons should be "dignified," or honorable. They shouldn't be "double-tongued." In other words, they shouldn't say one thing to one group of people, and another thing to another group of people. They shouldn't say one thing when they really mean another. They should be consistent in their speech. They shouldn't be greedy, using their position "for dishonest gain."

Dacons should also hold fast to the faith. Paul calls it "the mystery of the faith." When Paul uses "mystery," he means something specific. He means something that we couldn't

discover by ourselves, but something that God has now revealed. We couldn't discover on our own what God is like, or how we can have a right relationship with him. God needed to reveal that to us. I'll come back to that idea in a little while.

Paul also says that deacons should be tested. We shouldn't throw something into the role of deacon if we don't know them. Really, we shouldn't throw someone into the role of deacon if they haven't already demonstrated that they are truly Christians, that they are trustworthy, and that they have a heart to serve other people.

Then, in verse 11, Paul writes, "Their wives." Literally, he writes "women." Here, there is some debate. Is Paul saying that women can be deacons, or is he saying that deacons are men, and that their wives must be a certain way? Or, is Paul saying that deacons are normally men, but their wives can serve alongside them in their service?

Now, before I go any further, I want to say that there are some faithful, Bible-believing churches that have only male deacons, and there are some faithful, Bible-believing churches that have male and female deacons. But, again, I have to say this: deacons are not pastors. Deacons aren't leaders. They are servants who take care of physical needs of the church.

Now, there are some strong arguments for having female deacons, and there are some strong arguments for understanding that Paul is referring to wives who have some role to play in service in the church. In favor of female deacons, Paul does not write "their wives." It just says "women" in the original Greek language. He could have added "their," but he didn't. Also, when Paul writes about overseers, he doesn't refer to their wives. Why do deacons need to have anything written about their wives? Third, in the book of Romans, Paul writes about a woman who is a servant of a church. Literally, she is a *διάκονος*. This is what Romans 16:1 says: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1). The footnote in the English Standard Version says that "servant" could be translated as "deaconess." But it's not the female form of the word that is used here. It's the male form, deacon. Does Paul mean that Phoebe is an official deacon or is she just "a servant"? It's not clear. But it seems that she could very well be a deacon.

That being said, there are some good arguments for Paul referring to deacons' wives. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul has already used the word "woman" to refer to a wife. We see that in verse 2. If in verse 11 he's referring to women in general, it's a bit odd, because in verse 12, he goes back to referring to deacons who are male. If he's referring to female deacons in verse 11, why

doesn't he talk about their marital status? These are some of the arguments against having female deacons.²

So, what are we to make of this? Well, if we understand that deacons are not leaders and teachers, then there is no violation of what Paul writes about women in the church (1 Tim. 2:11–15). What is said about deacons could apply to men and women—except for verse 12, where Paul says that deacons should literally be “one-women men.” Perhaps the best way to understand Paul is to see that men should be deacons and should serve along with their wives.

There are situations where a female servant would be helpful. For example, imagine there is a woman in the church who needs help with something in her house. Maybe she's a widow who can't do all the housework. Maybe she's a single mom who doesn't have the time and energy to do everything in the house, like cleaning or fixing something. It would be unwise for a man to go into that situation, at least alone. It would be better for a woman to serve in that situation, or perhaps a husband-wife team.

This is something that we will have to decide on as a church. But I will say that my last church had some female deacons, almost always serving along with their husbands. One of the most biblical churches I know, Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., has deacons and deaconesses. Again, these people are not board members, decision-makers, leaders, or shepherds. They are servants. It's something to consider.

The third question I want to ask and answer is: Why do we need deacons? Hopefully this should be clear by now. A pastor, or even a group of pastors, can't do all the ministry of the church. We're not called to do all the ministry of the church. We need members of the church who take care of physical things, whether it's the building and grounds or going to people's homes to serve them in different ways, or being in charge of a deacon's fund, which is used to help people in times of need. At this point, some may wonder why we need people who are called deacons. After all, shouldn't all Christians be serving in the local church?

Yes, all Christians should serve. But the church needs some officially recognized servants, people who are trustworthy, who have demonstrated that they aren't greedy, but who can manage their own lives well. That's because deacons have some important responsibilities. One is that they have access to money and other resources. Even the seven men of Acts 6 were in

² Arguments for and against female deacons are found in Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 249–258.

charge of distributing food. Deacons today often have access to money to use to help the needy. They may also have to serve in sensitive situations, like going into people's homes. You need someone who is trustworthy in that case. And deacons end up representing the church. If the church is known for having servants that don't hold to the faith, who are greedy, who misuse their positions, then the church looks bad. Even more important, Jesus looks bad.

So, it makes sense to have officially recognized servants, people who can respond to needs in the church. And it's practical to have people who fit this role. The church should know who to call upon when there are needs. I should know whom I can call when I discover there's a need.

The fact that the church needs official officers dedicated to service shows how important physical service is. Christianity is more than just caring about where someone's spirit goes when he or she dies. It's about more than just "going to heaven." Christianity cares about the whole person. Christianity recognizes that God didn't just create spirits; God created a person who is both body and soul. Christians should care about where someone stands with God, what kind of relationship to Jesus a person has. But they should also care about the physical wellbeing of a person.

Taking care of physical needs is not an unworthy task. That's something that Christianity demonstrated to a world that thought less of servants. In the ancient world, in both Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, physical service was regarded as less important, far below that of rulers. But Jesus shows that serving is something great. We might say that Jesus is the ultimate deacon.

History is full of examples of people who try to make themselves look great. We want power and a high status. We want people to look at us and think we're great. This is fallen human nature. But Jesus taught something different. He said, the last would be first, and the first would be last (Matt. 19:30; 20:16). Two of Jesus' followers, James and John, seemed to want positions of power and status. They had their mother ask Jesus to put them at prominent positions in the kingdom of God. Jesus said that those who follow him will suffer. And then Jesus said,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25–28).

Jesus said that Gentiles—Romans in his day—lord their power and status over others. They were domineering. They wouldn't dare stoop down to the level of people below them. But those who follow Jesus should be different. If you want to be great, be a servant. If you want to be first in the kingdom of God, you must first be a slave.

That is completely contrary to the way of the world. Earlier, I talked about “mystery,” that it's something God must reveal. This is something that God must tell us, because it's not natural for us. And Jesus reveals to us that it is the right way. Why can Jesus say that the servant and the slave are great in the kingdom of God? Because Jesus himself came to serve. He said, “the Son of Man”—that's a reference to himself—“came not to be served but to serve.” How did Jesus serve? He gave “his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He has always been God. God the Father created the universe through the Son, by the power of the Spirit. He existed eternally in glory with the Father. But Jesus also became a human being over two thousand years ago. When he did that, he set aside his divine prerogatives. He left the realm of glory, heaven, to come to earth, where he would experience life as we do. He would experience hunger and thirst and fatigue and pain. He would be laughed at, mocked, rejected, betrayed, arrested, tortured, and killed. He did all this so that he could save his people from judgment, from condemnation. His death on the cross was the redemption price, the only thing that could free us from sin, from eternal death, from hell.

Why do we face condemnation? Because we have rejected God. God made us to reflect his glory, to represent him on earth, to love and obey him, to worship him, and, yes, to serve him. But we don't want to live under God's authority. We want to live life on our terms. We turn our backs on God, ignoring him, disobeying his commands. And this is a great evil. In fact, all the evil in the world can be traced back to rebellion against God. Since God wants a good creation, one that isn't tainted with evil, he has plans to judge the world, to punish sinners and remove sin from his creation. God is a righteous judge who will make sure that all rebellion is punished, because that rebellion ruins his good creation. If you had someone come into your house and destroy everything and harm your family, you would make sure that person was driven out of your house and punished, wouldn't you? Well, that's what God will do on judgment day.

But if God did that, every human being would be driven out of his house and punished. Yet God is merciful and gracious. He provided a way for our sins to be punished but for us not to

be driven out. Jesus is that way. He was punished for our sins. He was driven out, cut off from the land of the living, so that we could live eternally.

In another letter, Paul writes about this. In Philippians 2, Paul writes,

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

Jesus, though he was and is divine, didn't try to cling to his status in heaven. I like what a recent translation, the Christian Standard Bible says. It says Jesus, "existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited." Instead, he made himself a servant by becoming a human being. And he humbled himself even to the point of death on a cross, which was an instrument of torture. Only Jesus lived the perfect life. He never sinned. He didn't deserve to die, particularly in that manner. And when he died on the cross, he endured more than a physical death. He endured hell on earth, a spiritual pain that goes beyond what we could imagine.

Yet Jesus' death wasn't the end of the story. Paul continues:

⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9–11).

Jesus rose from the grave. He ascended to heaven. He has been exalted by God the Father to glory. And when he comes again to earth, every knee will bow. Some will bow in terror. Others will bow in worship. But every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, that he is the King, that he is God. And those who serve will be exalted, too. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus shows that service, even the most menial service, isn't something "below us." It is something that is great. Jesus even washed his disciples' feet, which would have been covered in dirt, since they wore sandals and walked on dirty, dusty roads. (You can read about this in John 13.) He did this to foreshadow his cleansing them from their sin. But he also did this as an example. He said,

¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have

done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus is far more than just an example. He did what we cannot do. He has the power to make us right with God, to take care of our sin problem, which is what separates us from God. We can't do that. And we can't die for another person's sin. So, we need to be served by Jesus. But we also need to serve like Jesus, stooping down to meet the needs of others. And this is something that is great.

If you do not know Jesus, if you don't know much about him or how to live for him, I would love to talk to you more. He is the only one who can give us eternal life.

If you do know Jesus, I hope that you are serving him by serving others. If you're not a member of this church, I would like to talk to you about joining the church. We may not all be deacons, but we should all serve in the local church.

If you're a member of the church, if you have a heart for service, and if you meet the qualifications for a deacon, perhaps consider serving in that role. If you do, keep in mind that "those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."