

The Character of Deacons

1 Timothy Series

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Let's read together in 1 Timothy 3. We're going to look at verses 8 through 13 today. Let's read just the first couple of these verses at verse 8, "Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

A church without godly leaders is an endangered church. So says Thabiti Anyabwile in his book on elders and deacons. A church without godly leaders is an endangered church. Indeed he goes on to say a church that does not train leaders is an unfaithful church, and to that I would add a church that does not know what to expect from its leaders is ultimately going to be a chaotic church and eventually a divided church. So if we want to protect our church from danger, if we want to be faithful, if we want to avoid chaos and division, we need to know what our church leaders should be like, what they should be doing, and what we should expect from them and do for them ourselves.

We have previously looked at the office of elder, today we'd like to look at the office of deacon, and we'd like to look, first of all, at the character of deacons; then secondly, at the gender of deacons; then thirdly, at the duties of deacons; and fourthly, at the reward for deacons.

First of all, the character of deacons as set before us very clearly here in 1 Timothy 3. Let's just briefly go through the qualifications and characteristics of deacons. "Deacons must be," notice that, it's not optional. It's not "it would be ideal," or "we would really prefer if this was the case." No, it's saying this is non-negotiable. If we don't find these characteristics, then we don't have deacons. It's as simple as that.

And the first characteristic is "grave," which means dignified or respectful. It's the opposite of being flippant and frivolous. These are serious minded men.

Secondly, they're not "doubletongued," and that could mean either they say one thing and do another or else they say one thing to one person and say another to another. "No," says Paul, "there must be a single tongue, that they say what they do and do what they say and say the same things wherever they are and whoever they are speaking to."

Thirdly, they're not addicted "to much wine," which is pretty obvious, really. Obviously, a drunkard or somebody who's vulnerable to that temptation is rarely if ever a good manager of anyone else's property, never mind his own.

"Not greedy of filthy lucre." Not greedy for money. Again, especially important in this role where there is much money management going on, then obviously having a man who is greedy for money, it's like putting together a spark and some dry gunpowder. And there's hardly a church in the whole world that's not been impacted by this kind of problem from men who have been greedy, stealing funds, embezzling funds, mismanaging funds therefore we must be sure that the kinds of leaders we have are not greedy, they are not materialistic or covetous.

Then we're told they "hold the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." Now, the mystery of the faith is not speaking of some esoteric kind of spooky strange area of Christianity that this group of men are particularly privy to. No, mystery in the New Testament is used for something that was previously hidden now being revealed. And you see that later on in the church there in verse 16, it says, "without controversy great is the mystery of godliness," and then goes on to describe how what was previously hidden, a mystery, has now been revealed, "God manifest in the flesh," and so on. So here where it speaks of the mystery of the faith, it's simply speaking of the deep things, the doctrines of the faith.

You may think this is strange that deacons are, as we'll see, very practical men. Why do they need to be theological men? Why is there any characteristic here that is mentioned regarding their doctrinal beliefs and holding them in a good conscience, not just knowing them but really holding onto them and really believing them? Why is that important? Well, of course, all Christian practice has to be guided by Christian theology. If we just have men doing practical works of kindness and goodness detached from doctrine, detached from the Gospel, then it's just social work, it's just social services, and ultimately will be misguided and misdirected. Therefore it's vital that these men also be Bible men, theology men, so that their practice is guided by their theology.

Also, of course, deacons, as we'll see, are men who are going to be continually in contact with the poor and the needy in a congregation. They're going to be visiting them. They're going to be in conversation with them. And although their focus is on their physical and material and bodily needs, yet of course all of these circumstances provide opportunities for advice and counsel and spiritual guidance and direction and therefore these deacons must be able to speak a word in season, a word of spiritual encouragement and instruction as well.

And, of course, one of the great functions of deacons is to relieve the elders and pastors so that they can focus on the teaching and instruction, the spiritual needs of the congregation. And unless deacons are persuaded of the importance of theology, the importance of this role of pastors and elders to teach and communicate theology, then they're going to be that concerned about relieving them from other issues to enable them to do that more theological and spiritual task. Therefore it's vital that these men hold the

deep things of the faith with a pure conscience so that they get their priorities right and so that they enable elders to do this work that is more instructive and theological.

Next qualification is that they should be proven. It says, "let these also first be proved." Now, this was similar in the qualifications for elders. You remember earlier on it says not a novice, and similarly here it's saying whoever we put into this office must show some ability, some leadership ability, some serving ability, some practical management abilities. It doesn't mean that we have trial deacons and test them in diaconal tasks so much as we're looking out for just leaders who are capable, practical, competent, and have this servant spirit. They are showing some seeds of this spirit and these abilities.

And then "being found blameless," being found able to do these things, "then let them us the office of a deacon."

Then we're told in verse 12 that they are to "be the husbands of one wife." They have to be one woman men. In other words, we can't have men serving the church who are not serving their wives first of all. They are focused on the needs of their wife and that is the only woman, as it were, in their lives.

Then we're told they "rule their children and their own houses well." Again, just a basic principle. You test a man on a lower level before you give more responsibility. And so these men, these future leaders must be examined as to how they manage their families and their households to see, have they got these practical skills in this home environment before they are plunged into far more consequential and difficult tasks.

That's a lot of responsibility, isn't it? These are difficult characteristics. But there's more because a deacon is not just qualified by himself, he's also qualified by his wife. You'll notice here in verse 11, "Even so must their wives be," and then four qualifications follow. Their wives must be "grave," and it's the same word as in verse 8 for the deacon himself. Again, it's just a sober, a serious, a dignified woman.

"Not slanderers." And the word behind this is the word from which we get "diabolos," which of course has often been used to describe devilish behavior, diabolical. And really it's saying that to slander another person is doing the devil's work. There must be no devilish behavior associated with the wives of our office bearers. If there is a woman going around slandering, diabolosing, being diabolical, being devilish, then however competent and however beautiful her husband's character is, he cannot hold office in the church.

Then there is "sober" or temperate. Well balanced, really. And fourthly here, "faithful" or trustworthy, "in all things."

Now, notice two things about these qualifications, these characteristics. First, there is that they are almost identical with those of elders. The qualifications if we were to put them together in two columns are almost identical. The single greatest difference is this: that the elders must be apt to teach, capable of teaching, competent in a teaching role, whereas

the deacons are not required to have that gift. They may have it and they may do it in certain situations but it's not an essential; it's not a requirement. And this teaches us, really, doesn't it, that the office of deacon is not an inferior office to that of elder. It's a different office. It has a different function. But given the equality of the characteristics, we mustn't view as elder way up here and deacon way down here.

Secondly, notice the large emphasis on character. It's very tempting for a church when they need men who are administrators, who have financial acumen, who may be even gifted in terms of building and management of buildings to say, "Well, these are the men we need. Look at their practical skills." And of course, that's important but what is of prime importance is character. Without character it doesn't matter how many of these practical skills are possessed, there is disqualification. So these must be borne in mind when electing to office. It's such an important role. It's such an influential role as underlined by the emphasis here on character. The character of deacons.

Let's look briefly, though, secondly, at the gender of deacons, and I was tempted to skip over this but really we can't ignore the cultural pressures that are brought to bear upon our churches today, especially in the day of mass communication. It's become quite common in many churches to have women deaconesses and even conservative Reformed churches have this or are moving in this direction. I want to try and show you, first of all, the arguments for this because you'll be hearing them and I don't want you to be unprepared, and then I want to give you some arguments against this.

First of all, the argument for women being in a diaconal office. It's obviously based around verse 11 which if we were to read literally without the words supplied by our translators, it would be this: even so wives grave or women grave. And that's the first argument that those in favor of this would bring to us, that the word here that's translated "wives" in our translation can also be translated "women." Even so must women be grave. And so they argue this is not so much about women as a wife of a man but a woman as a woman and therefore women deaconesses. Even so the women, supply the word deaconesses. Even so the female deaconesses. That it doesn't necessarily have to be translated "wife." And that's true, this word is variously translated depending on context "wives" or "women."

Secondly, it actually doesn't say "their wives" in the original Greek. The word is supplied by our translators to make it clear it's talking of deacons' wives and so this possessive pronoun is used, "their" wives. But that word is not there in the original. If Paul had wanted to eliminate any confusion, it's argued, he would have inserted "their" in his original letter.

Thirdly, there were women in the early church who were called deacon and the classic example is Phoebe in Romans 16:1.

The fourth argument is: the office of deacon is introduced in verse 8 with the word "likewise," and it's exactly the same word that's used in verse 11, although again translated in our version, "even so," and the argument is where here the office of male

deacon is introduced with this word, and the exact same word is used at the beginning of verse 11 to introduce another office, that of woman deacon.

These are the four primary arguments that are used to try and persuade us to have women deacons. Well, how do we answer this? First of all, males deacons are the focus in both verse 10 and verse 12. Verse 10 is speaking of the male deacon, verse 12 is speaking of the male deacon, therefore it would be a bit strange to have just one verse inserted in this context about women deacons.

Secondly, the word translated "wives" in verse 11, although it can be translated "women," is translated, and appropriately so, "wife" in verse 12. "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife." So the argument is, if it's translated "wife" in verse 12, it should be translated "wife" also in verse 11 given their closeness and proximity.

Thirdly, there would have been much clearer ways of establishing that he was speaking of women deaconesses than the language he used here. He uses such a common term, the word commonly translated "women" and "wives." If he really wanted to make it really clear that this was another order he was speaking of and such a revolutionary move, he could have found other words rather than the one here translated "wives" to make that clear.

Also, fourthly, the instructions are so brief. Just one verse with a few words. Given the amount of words given to elders and to male deacons, is it really going to be the case that he uses just one verse with such a few words to advocate for this real massive innovation to start an order of women deacons as well in the church? Just one verse, very brief, to cover apparently, they say, these qualifications for women.

And the last argument is there were women in the early church who performed diaconal ministry. There is no question about that. You can think of Dorcas. You can think of Lydia and Phoebe who is specially named as a deacon. But just because they're doing diaconal work, doing diaconal ministry, does not mean that there was a diaconal office for women. In fact, whatever title or office we give to it, women are an integral part of any church's mercy ministry, whether it's as wives of deacons or working independently and more privately. So we would argue that the gender of a deacon is male, not female.

But thirdly, let's move on to the duties of deacons. First of all, we want to look at the general function of deacons and then at their specific duties. How do we separate primarily elder from deacon? Well, the elder, the word means primarily "overseer," whereas the word for deacon is literally "servant." Now, it's true the elder is involved in serving and the deacon has some overseeing role as well, but in general the balance, the emphasis is that the elder is more overseeing and the deacon is more in the servant role.

And we see that where the office of deacon was first established in Acts 6. You'll remember there was this controversy in the church about widows being neglected and the apostles were being drawn into this discussion and eventually they inspired by God said, "We need another office. We need another group of leaders who will care for the poor,

who will serve the poor meals so that we be freed for the ministry of the word and prayer." So this word is really very much associated with serving tables, waiting upon tables. To free others up to minister, to serve the word.

Philip Ryken, a previous minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church, was preaching on this passage and he told this story about a man who was trying to teach his congregation about what a deacon was and when he saw how it was originally established as a serving role, waiting on tables, he phoned up the Philadelphia Restaurant School and he asked them, "What qualities are you looking for in a waiter?" And the Director of the school explained that above all else a good waiter is someone who notices what people need and gives it to them before they ask. A good waiter is someone who notices what people need and gives it to them before they ask.

Now, it might seem on first hearing, especially when we think of the role of server or waiter in our own culture, that this is a menial role, not just a servant role but a subservient role. However, when we look at the original appointment in Acts 6 at that context, we see that this is far from a subservient, a menial role, but indeed is a high and a noble calling. Just look at the characteristics required of a deacon and tell me that's a menial man. No, this is an honorable and a noble man. Indeed, in the first appointment they were to be filled with wisdom and of the Holy Spirit. This is a high role.

Also, the fact that this role facilitates the better ministry of the word and more prayer amongst the elders and the pastors again points to its importance and its value. And when you look at the impact of the deacon's role in the early church in Acts 6 and you notice what a unifying and energizing effect it had on the Christian community, again, we must conclude that this is a vital and important and a significant calling.

Philip Ryken again says, "To wait on tables in the name of Christ is one of life's highest callings." Thabiti Anyabwile says, "The joy, peace, unity and fruitfulness of the local church depends in part on having a cadre of faithful table servants who are present when needed and eager to serve without being intrusive."

So, you see, they are primarily called to minister to people's physical and material needs while the elder is called primarily to minister to spiritual needs. That's the general function of a deacon but what about their specific tasks in more detail? Well, if you'll remember when we looked at the office of the elder and his duties, we were working to put together a checklist of duties and that went through the consistory and it was agreed and we're beginning that process also with the deacons and we'll be beginning that shortly and eventually when it's all agreed, I'm sure that could be made available. But let me sketch the areas. I believe the Bible teaches there are the duties and responsibilities of deacons.

The first area is steward. They are to be stewards but they are also to steward stewards. They are to raise up in the Christian community stewards of what God has given us. They are to encourage the Christian community to steward their earning of money, their managing of money, their giving of money, and their leaving of money to future

generations. So there is this training aspect of the deacon's role, training us to be good stewards of God's gifts to us.

Secondly, collect. They are to gather in from God's people their gifts for the Lord's cause and kingdom. It may be weekly, regular and one-off collections as they decide as fit.

Thirdly, they are to allocate. So they have taught people how to steward, people as part of their stewardship are giving, the deacons are collecting and then they have to make decisions. How are they to allocate? How are they to give? How are they to apportion out this money? And there are a number of priorities here. First of all, is provision for the pastors, to care for their material and financial needs. Secondly, there is to care for the church property. They must allocate money to care and build the church. Then, thirdly, there's the care for the poor and the sick and the needy in the congregation. Fourthly, the poor, the sick and the needy outside the congregation. Then there is evangelism as well, both locally, nationally and internationally. What evangelistic activities will they fund and support locally and outreach and then international mission. So there is allocation.

Then, fourthly, manage. This is in two areas: the management of church buildings and the management of church money. In terms of buildings, there is the management of new building projects; there is the maintenance of existing buildings; and there is the increasingly important area of the security of church buildings, both outside service times and inside service times. In terms of managing the money, how to maximize return on retained funds with minimal risk; how to gather building funds for future needs; and how to distribute support for the educational needs of the congregation, whether Christian schooling or home schooling.

The fifth area is visit. This is, again, an area which maybe it's not been traditionally associated with deacons and yet you'll find in many of the classic books on the diaconate the importance of visiting. The elders visit with an eye primarily to spiritual needs but the deacons also visit with an eye to the physical and the material and the bodily needs of the congregation. So they visit the poor. They visit the sick. They visit the bereaved. They visit the elderly. They visit the unemployed. They are scanning the bulletin every week for new needs, for new situations, whether it's a health problem that might need funding of operations or drugs, or unemployment where a family might need help through a period of time, or a bereavement where there is a significant loss of an income, or there is age poverty, nursing home poverty as it's often called, as people's capital is rapidly diminished by the costs of nursing care. All of these areas can really only be picked up by keeping eyes and ears open, a sensitivity to need in a proactive way.

Then, sixthly, there is organize. There is the organizing for the sacrament so that the furniture and the elements are available and everything's in order. There is the organization of things like congregational meals and outings.

Sevently, there is relieve. They must be continually asking themselves, "How can we best relieve our pastors and elders from everything in order to maximize their ministry of the word and prayer?" And this should be a continual question at deacon's meetings, "Is there

anything else we can do to relieve our elders and pastors in order that they may better minister the word and have more time for prayer?"

And the last area is communicate. The information is coming in to them but that information is also coming to them from elders. They have information that they share with elders so there's a communication, the elders to deacons at the consistory level. Very important so that there's not this dualism, you just focus on the physical, you just focus on the spiritual. It's almost impossible, isn't it, to separate that? Then there is the gathering and providing of information about needs in the congregation and decisions made about how to communicate and if to communicate in the bulletin and reports, via the internet, or whatever. And there is also the communication of long-term plans and goals so that the congregation is not just in a reactive mode, responding to crisis, but we have men who are thinking ahead one year, five years, ten years.

And that communication also involves you. It's very easy to blame deacons, "Oh well, they didn't do this or they didn't do that." But maybe they didn't know and therefore there is responsibility on you as well to communicate needs, your own needs, but also to be looking at yourselves for needs in the congregation and communicating them discretely and wisely to the deacons to further investigate and look into. Information, then, is flowing in many different ways.

These are the eight areas where deacons have to be functioning: stewarding, collecting, allocating, managing, visiting, organizing, relieving and communicating. It's a ton of work, isn't it? And you know, you might say, "Well, okay, that's all the deacon's work. I just sit back and watch." But like the elder's role, everyone, every Christian has a pastoral role, even if it's just in their own family. They're not in an office but they have a pastoral, an overseeing role, a feeding and a nourishing role, so everyone, in a sense, is a deacon or doing diaconal work. No, maybe not in an office but in an informal unofficial way. There are all of these activities maybe in a microcosm and in their own lives too if we are Christians with a love for the weak and the poor.

That brings us, lastly, to the reward for deacons because when you look at all they have to do and you see the character requirements, the constancy and consistency that's required to be a deacon, and all the duties, that's just tough work. This is difficult work. This is demanding work. It's often unrewarding work in terms of recognition. Elders get a lot more recognition than deacons. Even my own role, just by the fact that it's more public. It gets its own reward. People say encouraging things and express appreciation. That's often not experienced by deacons and that's why here after going through the character and the gender and the duties of deacons, we have this beautiful 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."

There are three wonderful rewards for the deacon. First of all, he's rewarded with respect and influence. It says, "they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree," or a good standing, a good place. It's saying, "Yeah, a lot of the work is going to be unseen and invisible and behind the scenes, but there will be

many who will see, who will recognize, who will appreciate, and who will grow in their esteem and respect of you. You will rise in their estimation as they sense your care and your concern and your love and your charity." That's a guarantee from God. They will purchase, they will acquire a good place, a good standing, respect and influence.

Secondly, they will be rewarded with assurance of faith. It says, "and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus," and that's a strange thing. How come practical work like this which seems so mundane, so routine, so administrative, can have such a wonderful spiritual reward? And sure, there's not one person here that doesn't want more assurance of faith and here God says one of the ways is to be involved in diaconal work whether in office or out of it. He says those who do so will purchase to themselves great boldness, great confidence.

How does that work? Well, first of all, it works because motives are tested and found to be sincere and pure. As we've said, a lot of diaconal work is unseen. Most of us have no idea how many hours deacons put into their work, both when they're together and when they're apart. And that's hard to sustain when work is going unseen, unrecognized and unappreciated. In some ways, again for myself, a pastor, it's easy to be motivated because so much of what we do is seen and recognized but then I could be doing this just to be seen and to be recognized but a deacon doesn't have that motive, he doesn't have that help, as it were, and therefore when he finds himself doing this work unseen, unrecognized, unappreciated, and yet still finds enjoyment in it, he's looking to the Lord for his favor and approval, that's very confirmatory of faith. It's saying, "Well, obviously I'm not doing this just to be seen of men. I'm doing this for the Lord and as unto the Lord. That means my faith must be genuine and real." And there's an assuring and a persuading in that process.

Secondly, the deacons will see God work in them and through them, especially as they minister to the poor and the needy. As they have opportunity to give financially or give physical help, they are also giving spiritual counsel and spiritual advice that they see people act on and respond to and their lives increase and flourish and thrive and that too is just incredibly encouraging, to see God working in and through their office.

So that's two great rewards. The reward of respect and influence, the reward of confident faith, assurance of faith, and the third reward is they will be rewarded with greater insight into Christ's person and work because just as Christ is the ultimate overseer and elder and pastor, he's the ultimate deacon and servant and table waiter. In fact, he used the exact word "deacon" to describe his coming and his purpose in this world. For example, in Mark 10:43-45 he says, "I did not come to be served," and the word is "deaconed." I did not come to be deaconed, "but to serve," to deacon, "and to give my life as a ransom for many." In Luke 22:27 he said, "I am among you as one who deacons, as one who serves." It's incredible, isn't it? The Lord of glory came down on earth to be a deacon, to be a servant, to be a table waiter, to come and wait upon us and notice our needs and provide for them. Therefore in this office of deacon, there is through the practice of it greater insight afforded into who Christ was and what Christ did and why he did it on this earth.

Again, it doesn't take an office to do this and benefit from this. As we engage in diaconal work, in caring work, in charitable work, in Christ's name and for the Gospel's glory, we will gain insight into the person and work of Christ. What greater reward can there be than that? Amen.