

The Essential Framework of the Church Part 3: The Nature of Deacon Leadership

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Bible Text: 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-7
Preached on: Sunday, April 3, 2022

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The title of the message this morning is the same basic title as it was last week, the last two weeks, "The Essential Framework of the Church," is the main title the last three Sundays. We're talking about the doctrine of the church in this series and we were looking the last three weeks at the importance of leadership and so we've said that the title is "The Essential Framework of the Church," the subtitle this Sunday is "The Nature of Deacon Leadership." So the title is "The Essential Framework of the Church: The Nature of Deacon Leadership." We've look at this under, I said this is our third Sunday, two weeks ago it was "The Essential Framework of the Church: The Necessity of Leadership," then last week "The Essential Framework of the Church: The Nature of Elder Leadership," and today "The Essential Framework of the Church: The Nature of Deacon Leadership." Use that title, the essential framework, to emphasize the importance and I think the text the New Testament brings this out with such clarity and force how important leadership is in the life of the church. It's as important as the framing of a house, second only to the foundation in importance is the framing. The foundation has got to be solid but then the framing's got to be solid as well for a house to stand up and to last and to particularly stand up against the storms of life. In a church with weak leadership, you go to a church with weak leadership, it's like living in a house with shoddy framing. I mean, would you want to live in a house with really weak framing?

This is one of the things we see that happens when we look at sometimes, you know, we have tragedies like earthquakes that happen in third world countries and we see the difference when they happen in third world countries versus first world countries because of the quality of the foundation and the structural integrity of the buildings. There are many more fatalities in areas where the framing is not solid, the foundation is not solid, and so the whole building collapses. But where there has been great care to lay the right foundation and to make sure that the structural supports can stand up under an earthquake, there's less loss of life. How important structure is to the well-being of those who live in a building.

And so in choosing a church, this means that so often the things that people look to when they decide on a church, you know, there are so many different factors and all of these are important at various levels but they're not often placed in the right priorities. You know, you can look at the children's ministry, the youth ministry, you hear people say,

"My kids love, they're really happy there. They're happier at this church than that church." And it's not unimportant, it certainly is important, we need to minister well to children and young people at every age. Sometimes it'll just be like we like the preaching there, or we like the music there. Those things are obviously important and essential too but if you really want to know whether a church is a place you need to be, look at the leaders, look at the elders and the deacons, get to know the men that are in leadership, and if you feel that they really seem to be following Christ and doing what the Scripture says, you can feel good about putting your family there, putting your life there, and that's what we're looking at as we look at this, the framework of the church, the nature of deacon leadership.

The passage is 1 Timothy 3. It's one we've look at previously because it's the passage that lays out these two key offices, elder and deacon. As we've looked each week, we see it's all throughout the New Testament but this passage is the clearest explication of those two offices because Paul is writing to Timothy, a young pastor in Ephesus, he's pastoring a church in Ephesus and he says, "This is what you need to do to make sure the church is sound. This is how you're to conduct yourselves in the church of the living God which is the pillar and support of the truth." And he says that right after he tells him about the qualifications for overseers or elders, overseers and elders, same office, and the qualifications for deacons. So he's saying, "This is essential to the well-being of the church you are pastoring, Timothy. You must have biblically qualified elders and biblically qualified deacons if you want the church to fulfill its purpose of being," as he says in verse 15, "the household of God, the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth."

These things are fundamental and essential and that's because we noted that it's in the wisdom of God, the beauty of God's design, even though we are all equally granted access to the very throne room of God, there is no priesthood that stands between you and the Lord. You, yourself, if you're a Christian, you are a priest. You go directly into the Holy of Holies because of the access granted through Christ. We all together have access to God the Father through the blood of Christ yet the Lord still, though the ground is level at the foot of the cross, there still is this established structure in the church for the well-being of God's people. That is essential because authority and structure are a part of the way God has designed the universe, his creation.

And so we see these two offices, elders and deacons. We've said elders are shepherds, that's their primary calling, and so the elders are to shepherd the flock, to shepherd the people of God which is to feed the church, to feed the sheep the word of God, to lead and to guide spiritually and to care for the spiritual well-being of the flock. That's what elders do, they are shepherds. And what we're going to see, the other key leadership office is the office of deacon and the key word for deacon is servant, diakonos means servant. The verb diakoneo means to minister to practical needs. So the Lord has established two offices of leadership, the office of the shepherds and the office of the servants because we are all called to be shepherds and we are all called to be servants, because we're all called to be like Jesus and Jesus' favorite terms for himself, shepherd and servant. "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep," John 10. Jesus is

the preeminent shepherd. He's the one who feeds us the word of God, feeds us the gospel, feeds us through his own death for our sins, and he calls us to shepherd one another. We all, every single one of us has a responsibility to shepherd. You're to care about those around you. You're to look out for their spiritual well-being. And if we're all called to shepherd, we're all called to be like Jesus who is the Good Shepherd, who cares about everyone around him, who wants to help everyone continue to honor God.

Well, the elders are there to be in front of us modeling for us what it's like to shepherd so that we can become more like them as they become more like Jesus. Both offices say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." But Jesus is not just the Good Shepherd, he's also the Suffering Servant or the Servant of the Lord that was prophesied about in Isaiah. When God's Messiah comes, he will be the Servant of the Lord. You see this throughout the second half of Isaiah, chapter 40 to 66. "I will send my Servant," and he's talking about Christ. We were seeing the key passage in all of that is Isaiah 53, the Suffering Servant who in giving himself as an offering for sin, by his stripes we are healed. But he is the Servant of the Lord. Jesus is calling us to be like him. He is the true one of God who says, "Follow Me," that's what discipleship is, following Jesus, "become like Me, become conformed to Me, become a servant just like Me. Serve others." Galatians 5:13 says it's for freedom you've been set free but only don't lose your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another. As Christians you are called to be servants of every other believer and even of unbelievers, but particularly of those of the household of faith. Jesus, the preeminent servant, Jesus the preeminent shepherd, the office of elder says, "Follow me as I follow Christ in shepherding," the office of deacon says, "Follow me as I follow Christ in serving." And as we have these leadership groups in our lives and they're doing that and they're teaching us how to do that, then we all become more like Jesus, we all become more humble servants, we all become more loving and compassionate friends and shepherds to one another. This is the beauty of God's design.

So today we look at the nature of the deacon leadership that we need in our lives. We're going to read 1 Timothy 3:8-15, verses 8 to 13 are really the focus of the first part of our message but we're going to read verse 8 to verse 15.

8 Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, 9 but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. 11 Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. 12 Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. 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. 14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we ask that You might now by Your Spirit open the eyes of our hearts, teach us, Lord, help us to see what You're calling us to be and to do and help us to be more like Jesus. We pray in His name. Amen.

So for us to be what God wants us to be as a church, we need leaders like this, elders and deacons like this, but for you, listen carefully, for you to be what God wants you to be as a Christian, you need leaders like this. You and I need leaders like this, elders/shepherds, deacons/servants who say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." We mentioned that deacon, elder nominations are going to be going through next week and just as I shared last week, we have five active elders, we have seven active deacons right now. We've had other men who've served and served faithfully but have stepped back, taken some time off. In fact, Kim Pitts is stepping back right now to take some time off from his ministry as deacon. He's done just such a wonderful job serving through the years in so many ways. He'll continue serving but he's stepping back from that right now. That leaves us still with seven active deacons and I'll just tell you who those are. It's on our website but our website is being overhauled by one of our deacons, Boon Lau. But anyway the deacons are Denver Clark, Boon Lau, Bill Maier, our chairman, Peter Pace, Karl Reilmann, Victor Tan and Matt Ziesmer are our seven active deacons, and so we're looking for nominations for additional deacons and additional elders and I'd encourage you to pray for these men and their ministry and also for those that God would set apart to the task.

Now what we're going to do as we look at this topic, the nature of deacon leadership, we're going to look at it under three points. It's going to be a lot like last week. The first is what deacons must be. What deacons must be, and that's really the focus of 1 Timothy 3:8-13. What deacons must be comes before what deacons must do. So often we see Scripture just confronts the way we normally think about things because when we think about things, practical needs that need to be met, we think in terms of skills. Skills are important but God doesn't lead with that. We might think, "Well, this person knows how to do a spreadsheet. He's the guy that needs to manage this. He's clearly got the abilities. This person is great with his hands, he can fix anything, therefore I'm going to nominate him for deacon." Well, deacons need to have practical skills like that. "This person is great working with people and being able to minister well to people who are suffering or hurting." Well, that's important too, that's an important skill, all of those are important skills but what the Scripture says is, first of all, you need to look at what a deacon is and what a deacon must be and what a deacon must be is like Jesus in his character. He must be advancing in Christ-likeness. That's what we see in 1 Timothy 3. Paul tells Timothy, "You need overseer/elders, you need deacons, but it's not what they do. I mean, what they do is essential to the church, you've got to have them doing it, but first you must start with character." That's the qualifying factor, look at the person's heart, look at their life.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 has eight qualities for deacons. There's four additional qualifications for wives of deacons in verse 11. And we're going to look a little bit later at Acts 6 and see there's three additional qualifications for deacons in Acts 6. But so there's 8 and 3, eight here and then three in Acts 6, and then there's the four about wives that we'll talk

about in a little bit. That's 11 qualifications and they're all about character here and in Acts 6. Paul says here to Timothy, "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity." This first qualification, to be men of dignity. Some of the other translations say "worthy of respect; dignified," the King James says "grave." It means a seriousness, solemnity but it really pictures a person who commands respect, not trying to but just his character, the way that he carries himself inspires respect. This is the first thing to look for in a deacon, a sense of dignity.

Secondly, "not double-tongued." Literally in the text actually not saying the same thing twice or saying two different things. Our colloquialism, speaking out of both sides of your mouth. A deacon is not to be like that. He's not to say one thing to one person and say something different to someone else. Someone has commented that flattery is saying to people to their face what you would not say behind their back. Think about that. And gossip is saying things about someone behind their back that you would not say to their face. Either way you're double-tongued. A deacon is not to be that way, they'll say the same thing to someone's face that he would say behind their back and, of course, behind their back, we're not going to be talking behind each other's backs anyway but you get the idea. We don't say two different things based on the person that we are talking to. There's integrity of speech.

Thirdly, "not addicted to much wine." Literally in the text it means "not bringing near much wine." Now clearly the fact that adding the word "much" in it means that drinking wine is allowable but it's something to be very careful about, and so that's why the translations say "not addicted to much wine, not indulging in much wine," or the King James, "not given to much wine." In fact, the word that's really used here means "to be paying attention." In fact, the word is often used translated throughout Acts as giving attention to something. It's a word which pictures the mind being focused and so the idea is the mind is not focused on much wine, is not under the control of wine at all. This man is under control of the Holy Spirit. He's temperate.

The fourth qualification we see, "not fond of sordid gain." The ESV translates that "greedy for dishonest gain." I think that's a good translation. It pictures filthiness, shameful, disgraceful, and greed together. So greedy that you're willing to do filthy, shameful, disgraceful things to get money. The deacon has no hint of that in his character. This makes sense because deacons are going to be handling money and they need to be free of this character defect and have advanced greatly in the way they see money. So that's the fourth qualification here in the passage.

So we see that's all we have in verse 8 and verse 9 we come to the fifth qualification, "holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." This shows that deacons aren't just managing, they are managing practical ministry things but the text understands that for them to do their job well, they have to be men who know the Lord and know the Scriptures. These are men who have a grasp, a firm grasp of the word of God. In fact, we're going to see in a minute right after the deacons are appointed in Acts 6, you have Stephen and Philip in the spotlight in chapter 7 and chapter 8. They're two deacons. Stephen is going to be the first martyr of the faith, preaches an incredible sermon in Acts

7, then Philip is going to be known as the evangelist and is going to be used by God to bring the Ethiopian eunuch to salvation in chapter 8. So you're introduced to the deacons and you see look at these guy's, they're even ministering the word. Even though the deacon ministry is not primarily about the ministry of the word, it's to free up the elders for the ministry of the word, but these are still men who have spiritual content. They hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. A firm grasp of the teaching of God and yet they hold it in a way that shows that it's impacted their life. They have a clear conscience. They are living what they believe.

Sixth qualification is in verse 10, "These men must also be first tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach." So I would say that's testing and beyond reproach is one qualification. They're to be tested, proved, tried, and then if they're found blameless, beyond reproach, without obvious stain, that is, they're examined, they're looked at. The word for "testing" is like you're testing metal to see if it's pure, you're testing something to see if it's up to the task. You know, it's like testing a bridge, the structural integrity of a bridge to see if it can hold up under the weight. And when it's proved worthy, then it is put into service. Same way here, you test the man and then you see if he's blameless and then he serves.

One of the things that I want to say a word about is our process. We don't often talk about this but just so you know, the way we handle our deacon, elder nomination and installation process, we ask for nominations from the church, these are a very important part of the process, we take that with a lot of weight because we believe that if the Lord, you know, is bubbling up certain men, the church is seeing certain men as set apart, there will be a number of nominations. And the elders then take the nominations and we work through that. How many nominations does someone receive? Oftentimes we will receive nominations about people that we don't put further in the process. There's either not enough nominations or we may know something about a person's life right now, may have had a conversation with them and we know they're not ready right now, and so we'll hold that nomination back. So the elders have the responsibility to filter that but if there's sufficient nominations and we feel like this is an opportunity that we should explore, then we contact the person and we have a conversation with them and we tell them, "Are you willing to be considered? Are you willing to be trained?" Then, okay, we're going to have an interview. Then we're going to have an interview with you and at least two or three of the elders, sometimes all of them but usually it's two or three on the initial interview. We interview the candidate and then we also interview their wife. We want to see if the wife agrees that this person meets these qualifications. We talk through each of these qualifications with the man and then with his wife. Then if we have green lights there, we say, "Okay, now we're going to move, if you're good we're going to move into the training phase," and we study what a deacon does or an elder does, and that usually takes two or three months. There are meetings every two or three, four weeks, depends on how much reading we're doing. We get together for several hours, we talk through the material, and the instruction is or the mindset is we understand that if God's in this, he'll confirm it throughout the process. And so just because we start the training doesn't mean that you're definitely going to be put forward to the church. We may decide as we work through the process, you may decide, we may decide it's not right. If you're thinking it's

right, your wife is thinking it's right, we're thinking it's right at the end of the process, we're going to then put you before the church and the church has to vote, and the church has the opportunity and the responsibility to really seriously weight that. And deacons require two-thirds of all votes cast. That means including abstentions, two-thirds of all votes have to be in the affirmative. For an elder, three-fourths of all votes have to be in the affirmative. Usually it takes about four to six months for the whole process. So we think that's the testing that's talked about here. If you have other questions about that, you can follow-up with one of the elders at any time.

So that's the qualification "tested and beyond reproach." That's the sixth character quality. The seventh, we skip down to verse 12 because, well, verse 11, "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." Now here in the Greek the word translated "women" in the New American Standard is translated "wives" in the ESV because the word, "gune," is actually ambiguous. It can be translated "women" or "wives" and context has to determine that. The word "men" and "husbands" is the same way in Greek. It can be translated "men" or it can be translated "husbands," depends on the context.

So the question is, is this talking about women deacons or wives of deacons, you see? That's the issue. I think you can make a case for both positions. Our church believes the best case is made for this being wives of deacons and I'll tell you just the reason, and that's our stated policy. But the reason we believe that is, first of all, verse 11, these four qualifications to break in the middle of talking about deacon and he goes back to deacons, male deacons in verse 12 because he says "they must be husbands of one wife," so there's this kind of parenthesis in the middle. It would seem that the women would be after the complete description of a male deacon if it was women deacons. Why do you break in the middle to go to women deacons? It makes more sense to go to wives of deacons in that case, but also just the context of 1 Timothy. In chapter 2, maybe on the same page depending on how your Bible is configured, verses 9 to 15 speaking about the role of men leading the church, that women are not to be exercising authority over a man. So when you put that in context, it seems clear to us that what's going on here is deacons and their wives and what it says is the wives of deacons really are serving like deacons, they're, in a sense, deaconesses but they're the wives of deacons, not women without their husbands. Again, it's debatable, there are good sound churches that have the other position, that see this as deaconesses but our church, we believe that it is wives.

So but it's interesting and instructive that, as we take it, wives, there are qualifications for the wives and why not for the elders' wives? Well, because the deacons' wives are more apt to be actively involved in situations in people's homes, for instance. Remember the office of deacon is formed, as we're going to see in a minute in Acts 6, to minister to widows and so men ministering to women need to have their wives with them, they need to be a key part of that so that everything is appropriate and godly.

And these four qualifications for wives: dignified, not malicious gossips, temperate, faithful in all things. The idea that they don't take information that they have and then use it in any way that would hurt anyone. They're not malicious gossips. They're dignified.

They also inspire respect. So this shows that deacons' wives are actually a part of the process. We're asking the wives about their husbands, we're also asking them about themselves, do you see these qualifications in your life? Temperate. Faithful in all things. Trustworthy and dependable.

Then you get back to the seventh and eighth qualification for male deacons and we see those in verses 12 and 13. The seventh qualification is "must be husband of one wife," in verse 12. This we take to mean a one-woman man. Literally in the Greek that's what it says, a one-woman man. This is the idea that the man has an established pattern for a number of years of being faithful to his wife. It doesn't mean that he's never been divorced, we don't believe. We have to search out the issues if there was a divorce; did this man leave a woman he shouldn't have left; was he the guilty party. All of that's got to be carefully examined but it's more about, like all the other qualifications, they're not about what you were 20 years ago, it's what you are now and what you have been for a period of time.

So purity, sexual purity is a key part of the office of deacon and the office of elder. Is this man a one-woman man. And then, lastly, the eighth qualification, "good manager of children and the household." Does he manage well his family? How do his children see him? How does his wife see him? How does he run the household? These are key things that show the men that God is setting apart to the office of deacon in the church.

Now I want to continue, we're still on point 1, what deacons must be. Turn to Acts 6 for a moment and we'll read verses 1 to 7. Acts 6:1-7,

1 Now 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. 2 So 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. 3 Therefore, 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. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

So the first thing we see is that when this practical ministry issue arose, the 12 realizing that there needed to be a division of labor to handle this important essential ministry of caring for the needs of the widows, they said choose for yourselves seven men, but look what he says about them, "of good reputation." Here are the three qualifications here:

good reputation, full of the Spirit, full of wisdom." These aren't just men that have skills, again, practical skills, these are men who know God and walk with God. So those three qualifications are echoed in the eight qualifications that Paul speaks of in 1 Timothy 3, so all 11 are about character. That's what deacons must be, they must be like Jesus in their character, like Jesus in their service.

Now number 2, the second point. We looked at what deacons must be, now we look at what deacons must do. What deacons must do. They must do what Jesus did, in a phrase, they must do what Jesus did, they must serve like Jesus, they must be like Christ who said, "If you want to be great, you must be servant of all for the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many." So deacons are to be like Christ in their service.

Now we see in this passage, we sometimes are prone to think that the deacons are handling something that's not that important. The elders said, "Hey, we can't neglect the word of God to wait on tables or to serve tables." And the way that we read that, sometimes we kind of import into it kind of our normal attitudes, you know, people that wait on tables, waiting on tables is something good you may do to work yourself through college or it may be something you have to do because of certain economic situations but it's not something that people necessarily aspire to as a career, and so we don't tend to hold it in high esteem even though it's really, when you look at it from God's economy, it's actually a very beautiful thing. The Lord esteems things we don't. We think lowly of things he thinks highly of. We think highly of things he thinks lowly of. And it's very important that we understand that the deacon ministry, this is a glorious ministry. We need to elevate it in our own hearts and minds so that we see it the way God sees it.

When the 12 who were really functioning like elders, I mentioned this, I think this is proto-elders in the 12 apostles, proto-deacons in these seven men. It's God in his sovereignty, I love this, God in his sovereignty revealing his will. This hit me with new force this week as I was pondering this because I thought to myself, people make the argument, "Well, this isn't really deacons and elders because the word 'deacon' does not occur in the text, diakonos, the noun, the singular noun does not occur in the text." But three times a form of that word "deacon" occurs, "diakonia," the ministry, the serving of food in verse 1, in verse 2 "serve tables" is "diakoneo," and in verse 4 an interesting irony is the word "the ministry of the word." When the elders say, "We will devote ourselves to prayer, to the ministry of the word," do you know what that word is? Diakonos again. It's the word, literally they're saying, "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the deaconing of the word. We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the serving of the word. We're not going to be able to serve the tables because we must serve the word. All of us are servants." Do you see that? And service is glorious and beautiful. We serve a Savior who girded himself with a towel the night before he was crucified when any of us would have been thinking about when we have something bad coming, can you think of anybody else beside yourself? When something is looming ahead in your life that is critical, that is difficult, how hard it is to think of others? And the Lord Jesus has the cross in front of him when he will become sin for us that we might be saved, he has that in front of him and yet he takes the time to serve the 12, girds himself with a towel and

acts like the lowliest slave and washes their feet. That's our God. We serve a humble God. He is a God of all glory. He dwells in light inaccessible hid from our eyes. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise. Everything about him is the infinite. He is infinity and we are nothing and yet our God is meek and willing to come down, the second person of the Trinity in the form of a man, and take upon himself the form of a servant and being found in appearance as a man, he humbles himself to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

And so service is a beautiful and glorious part of who God is, and so the deacon ministry should be held in the highest esteem. In fact, just let me mention one thing, 1 Timothy 3:13, an interesting verse I didn't cover and I want to hit quickly. After he gives all those qualifications for deacon, he says something very interesting in verse 13 of 1 Timothy 3. We're going back to Acts 6 pretty quickly so hold your place there if you went back to 1 Timothy 3. He says, "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." High standing and great confidence. High standing, excellent standing, NIV good standing. The word translated "high" in the NASB and "good" in the ESV is the word for "lovely; aesthetically good and wonderful." And so the idea is that in the standing there's a step, they're a step above and it's lovely and the idea is a man who serves well as a deacon is held in high esteem by the congregation and, I believe, by heaven itself. He is held in high esteem. It's like when Daniel encounters the angel who comes to him and he says, "O Daniel, man of high esteem." What's he talking about? "You're highly esteemed in heaven because you're faithful and because of God's grace." Of course, you're a sinner, you're a filthy sinner, you're just like everybody else except that you have now humbled yourself and become like your God, and to that degree you're held in high esteem.

He's saying deacons are held in high esteem and the idea "great confidence," he gains for himself a high standing and great confidence. This is a word that normally does mean confidence, boldness, but it literally, it means to speak freely, the word that's translated "confidence." It means that you have the confidence to speak freely, you have the boldness to speak freely. You speak what's on your heart. You don't hold back. So he's saying a man who serves well is highly esteemed by the congregation and what he says will be heard, ought to be heard. He ought to have a high place and value in the life of the congregation.

That's what he's saying here and back to Acts 6, the ministry of the deacon is so valuable, what deacons must do, and I think we see some things clearly in three things, there are three subpoints under number 2, what deacons must do. First, A, 2A, they work under the direction of the elders. Even though they have, in one sense, the exalted office of deacon, yet there's clearly a hierarchical relationship. In Acts 6, it says verse 3, you choose men, "select from among you of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task." The elders are the ones who put them in charge of the task. And then verse 6, the elders pray and lay their hands on the deacons and install them.

So the deacons are working under the direction of the elders. So what deacons must do, they must work under the direction of the elders. They're not a competing body like the House and the Senate sometimes working against each other in government. That's not the way elders and deacons are to function. Sometimes that happens in churches. The deacons feel like they're a counterweight to slow down the elders. "Those elders, they're crazy, we have to slow them down." We may be crazy but that's not what you're supposed to do. The second thing, though, to work under the direction of elders, secondly, they're to spot and meet pressing needs. They're to cultivate a sensitivity to spot and then to meet pressing needs. That's what's happening here. There were pressing needs.

People were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. We talked about this, there are people from all over the Roman world who have to Jerusalem for Pentecost, they intended to be there maybe a week or 10 days, now they're staying weeks and months because their lives had been changed. They didn't expect to be born again and saved and now set on fire for God, and since they have, they want to stay under the teaching of the 12. This is an opportunity for them to be built up in their faith and so some of them for three months, some of them for six months, some for years, some maybe stayed the rest of their lives there but many of them stayed for a period of time, then took the gospel back to their home place, but in the meantime they'd run out of money. And you know, they didn't have Western Union. Isn't that funny? I'm so dated to say that. They didn't have their iPhone that they could scan and get funds from their bank back home. They only had what they carried with them. So they needed the care of the saints that were around them that had resources, the saints that lived in Jerusalem. This is why they need the distribution of the food.

This is also going to be a part of life. Some people, they go through circumstances, widows are in more need than others and that's going to be a part of what the church is called to do. We see that as the New Testament continues to unfold, but at this time particularly there were these pressing needs and there was this danger, there was a danger that the ministry would be undercut by this division. In fact, the word when it says "a complaint arose," I think that was a loaded word for people who had read their Greek Old Testaments, many of these folks and, well, in their Hebrew Old Testaments too, but the word here in the New Testament is a word that is found throughout Exodus 14 to 17 and Numbers 14 to 17. You read those chapters and what you will read about is a lot of grumbling and complaining and the word "grumble" over and over and over again is the same word here, "a complaint." In fact, it's over 20 times in those six chapters you'll read either "grumble" or "complain" depending on your translation, "murmur." And the word here is an onomatopoeic word, you know, a word that sounds like what it is describing. "Grumble" is an onomatopoeic, it sounds like what...the perfect explanation of onomatopoeia is buzz, the word "buzz." It sounds like what it describes and so "grumble, murmur, gongusmos" is the word here in Greek. It means someone's talking below their breath or not to be heard by those around them but they're talking to others. There's this complaint and it's building and what you see in Exodus and Numbers is it is deadly to the life of God's people. It will keep them out of Canaan.

So when this word comes up, this is a serious, this is a serious threat to the precious work that God is doing in his brand new church, and so as you read this passage, I encourage you to read it this week, start reading at Acts 2 or read from Acts 1 through Acts 7 and watch what God does. What you basically will see is this pattern, the Lord saves them at Pentecost in Acts 2 and they began preaching the word, Peter and the apostles began preaching and teaching the word, and what happens is they preach and they teach and disciples are brought to faith, 3,000 in a single day in Acts 2:41. They continue to minister and Acts 2 ends up they're devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the word, to breaking of bread and prayer, and the Lord is adding to their number daily those who are being saved. So the word is going forth like that song we sang earlier, "Send forth Your victorious word." The word is being sent forth and it's having victory. It's bringing people to salvation. Acts 4, they go up to 5,000 now, new believers, and it's continuing. They're preaching, then they have persecution. Satan tries to stop the preaching and his first strategy is persecution. After Peter's second sermon when he heals the lame man in Acts 3, Peter preaches and they arrest him and they say stop preaching in this name. Satan's working through the Jewish religious authorities to stop the gospel from going forth, stop the preaching. Well, they say, "Can we obey you rather than God? No, we're going to obey God." And so they keep preaching. In fact, they pray in Acts 4 for more boldness, more freedom to speak. They don't pray for protection, they pray for boldness, and as they keep preaching more and more disciples are being added.

Then when you understand that, look at chapter 5, verse 42, the last verse before chapter 6, our passage, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." You see, the word is going forth, the word is going forth. Acts 6:1, "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose," a murmuring, a grumbling just like in the nation of Israel on the way to Canaan. This is deadly. This must be addressed and so the elders don't say, "Hey, guy, you just," you know, to the Hellenistic Jews, "you guys need to be more patient. What's wrong with you?" No, they realize there's a problem and they put in place a practical solution. They raise up men for this important office and they're to spot and meet the pressing needs. They're to do this so that they can address those needs, meet them.

So I said that the three things elders or deacons do, what deacons do, number 2, work under the direction of elders, secondly, spot and meet pressing needs, and thirdly, engage members in ministry to pressing needs. The deacons aren't supposed to do the ministry, they're supposed to engage others, they're supposed to facilitate the ministry of all the other believers. These seven men couldn't care for those now thousands of people. They could administer it, though, and they could get other people involved in serving the tables. And so deacons are supposed to, they're supposed to be leading out in doing but also getting others to come with them. So the Lord is making the church more and more a church of people who meet pressing needs.

So those are the three things: work under the direction of elders, spot and meet pressing needs, engage members in ministry to meet pressing needs. And it's always the focus, first, is within the body. That's where the pressing needs are. These are the believers that they're ministering to. It doesn't mean we don't minister ourselves, of course we do, but

the primary focus is to care for the church and then as we have opportunity, we go out into the world, having been built up we go out into the world and then we love our enemies, we love people around us, we minister to people out there and we share the gospel.

So that's the second point, what deacons must do. Thirdly, we looked at what deacons must be, what deacons must do, thirdly, how important deacons are. How important deacons are. They free up the ministry. There are two subpoints here. They're important because they free the preaching of the word. They free the preaching of the word. The danger here, Satan's first attempt to stop the word from spreading and the disciples from being made was to persecute, it was persecution, and that didn't work and now what he tries is distraction. He wants the 12 to be distracted from prayer and the serving of the word. Do you see that? That's why they say, "It's not appropriate or fitting for us, it's not desirable for us to neglect, that is, to leave behind, the word of God in order to do this important ministry. We cannot leave behind the word of God. You guys choose seven men we'll put over this so that we can serve the word while they serve these important needs."

So the ministry of the deacons frees up the preaching of the word. That's why the bookends of this little seven verse section are so important when it said in verse 1, "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews in the daily serving of food." Or right before that, the word had been spreading, the disciples were increasing, the disciples were increasing, verse 1. Verse 7, "The word of God kept on spreading," after they deal with what they need to deal with, they appoint these men, they begin ministering, they're put into place, what does it say in verse 7? "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." Look at the power of the deacons' ministry. When they do what they're called to do, it frees up the ministry of the word. It unleashes the ministry of the word. It unleashes the power of the word. Deacon ministry and people getting involved in ministry frees up, then, the going forth of the victorious word of God.

A second subpoint, it doesn't just free the preaching of the word, it frames the preaching of the word. It frames the preaching of the word. Deacons' ministry is so important because it frees the preaching of the word and it frames the preaching of the word. Our God is a God who does deal with every part of life. He cares about our bodies. He made us in our mother's womb. He knit us together. The body is good; even though it's tainted by sin the body is good. In heaven, in the new heavens and new earth, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, well, even if you're not, in hell you will have a body if you don't know Christ. You will experience eternity separated from God in hell in an embodied state suffering physically as well as in your soul. If you are a Christian, you will have an eternal life in the new heavens and new earth in an embodied state. You will eat. You will drink. You will laugh. You will hug. You will embrace. You will have a body because God wills that it's good.

So he cares about our bodies. He cares about the practical needs. The needs of these widows is essential. They need to be fed. And this idea of meeting pressing needs, in fact, look with me at Titus for a moment, some key verses in Titus, this is a key theme in Titus, good deeds, good works depending on your translation. But a key verse is Titus 3:14, next to last verse in Titus. Titus is right after 1 & 2 Timothy, before Hebrews. So after all the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, all of that to get to 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Verse 14, Paul says to Titus, "Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful." Paul says, "Listen, the church needs to be training the people to meet pressing needs." We all need to be servants who spot pressing needs and meet them. That's what God wants for every one of us, and so deacons are those who lead out in that important character quality and skill.

It's interesting, though, how does it frame the message? Look with me, turn back over to Titus 2:9 and 10. It's a really beautiful picture here. Paul says in chapter 2:9 of Titus, "Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative." So he's saying don't fight the social battles of the day, you seek the glory of Christ, "not pilfering, but showing all good faith." So he's saying live in such a way that you will do the very best of your job and that you will not be argumentative, you'll not be stealing from your master, you'll show good faith, you'll be trustworthy. Why? Because it matters to the gospel, "so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect." That your character and your actions adorn the doctrine of God.

This word for "adorn" is the Greek word "kosmeo." It comes from the idea of making order, orderly and arranging, but we get our English word "cosmetic" from it. You adorn something, you put it all in order, you make it nice, neat and right. He's saying that when our behavior, the way we handle difficulties in our lives, when we handle it like this, we're actually framing the gospel that we preach. Our lives are framing the gospel. They're adorning the gospel.

Now the gospel itself is so glorious and so beautiful but the world, they don't see it that way and so we have to make it clear in our lives, draw attention, like a good frame does to the beautiful portrait or picture. And so deacons are about teaching and helping us and leading us to live lives of sacrificial service to the pressing needs of others, not grumbling or complaining but serving one another out of love, and this is framing the gospel. It's helping people to want to know, "Hey, what makes you so different? How can you put up with the stuff you put up with and be so kind?" 1 Peter 3:15, "Be ready always to give a reason for the hope that is within you." They see you bear up and they say, "What is it about you?" John 13:34-35, Patty inscribed that on our wedding rings when we got married. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, by your love for one another." When the church of Jesus Christ is learning how to serve one another and love one another, to meet pressing needs, to become more like Christ in service, and he said that, a new commandment I give to you, that was right after he had washed their feet. "Love as I have loved you. And when you love as I have loved you, they will know the truth of the gospel. It will powerfully support and lift up the truth

of the gospel and authenticate it in their blind eyes. It will give them eyes to see." God will use your service, your ministry, to open their hearts.

So can you see how urgent it is to have a church where we're learning to do this, and how urgent it is for a church to have men who are leading us in this path? And what a beautiful and glorious design God has put together. He does all things in perfection, and the more we see his handiwork, the more joy it gives us, and the more meaning it gives us. This means it makes everything, the most mundane act of service is testifying to the reality of the gospel. You care for someone, this has happened wonderfully in our church in so many ways, even in recent days, take someone in, you care for their practical needs and you are framing the gospel. You're helping people see the reality that what we say that God sent his Son into the world to save sinners and he is truly a glorious Savior. That's what God has called us to. He is good.

Let's go to him in prayer.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your design, Your wisdom, and the way You have set up Your church, the way You have called us to be like Jesus as shepherds and servants. And Lord, we confess we don't value the things that You value so often, even as we prayed earlier, we don't set our mind on heavenly things and we don't think like You think. Help us, Lord. Help us to see the beauty and glory of just ministering to practical needs and help us to develop and cultivate such an ease in doing that that we will hear Jesus says what He says He will say at the last judgment, "I was hungry and you fed Me. I was thirsty and you gave Me drink. I was naked and you clothed Me. I was in prison and you visited Me." And those on His right will say, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You? When did we see You thirsty and give You drink?" And You will say, "When you did it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you did it also unto Me." We pray this for the glory of Your name. Amen.