

# The Qualification of Deacons

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Date: 09 July 2017

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn our Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 3. And this morning our attention will be directed to verses 8 through 13.

! And as noted in your bulletin, and as announced by Brother David a short while ago, today we as a church are embarking upon a process, or a further step in that process, of establishing a diaconal ministry, whereby we will appoint deacons and deaconesses.

Deaconesses to serve in that ministry. It is a process that was announced back in January of this year, and since the time the elders have identified and interviewed the first group of men and women, and have approved them as candidates to be put before the congregation for affirmation. And in many ways, the individuals who are being put forth for affirmation as diaconal candidates are already doing the work of deacons and deaconesses.

And so, in some respects, this is more of a formalization of the work that they are already doing. But I thought it would be fitting for us this morning to consider what God's Word says about deacons in the local church.

[ 1 : 24 ] And that's the reason for taking a break from the Galatians series to consider this passage in 1 Timothy chapter 3, verses 8 through 13.

So, please follow along as I read. I'm reading from the English Standard Version. If you have another translation, yours will read slightly differently.

1 Timothy chapter 3, beginning in verse 8. 1 Timothy chapter 3, verse 9.

1 Timothy chapter 3, verse 9.

And also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. Let's pray together. Father, we're so grateful this morning for the privilege of being able to sit under the preaching of your Word.

[ 3 : 15 ] Lord, you are addressing us through your Word in this moment. And I pray that beyond my voice, your voice will be heard by all of us, myself included.

Father, I pray that you would be seated. Father, I pray that you would grant me the ability to stay within the four corners of your Word and to be faithful to proclaim your Word.

Lord, I pray that you would keep me, Lord, that you would keep me from error and that you would keep me from excess. And Father, we ask that you would use your Word this morning to further build up this local church.

And in particular, Lord, to build up the diaconal ministry in this church. So we commit ourselves to you now and pray that you would speak to our hearts.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Should I do this? Good to see you this morning. The first seven verses of 1 Timothy chapter 3, the Apostle Paul instructs us about the office and qualification of elders.

[ 4 : 39 ] Initially, he was instructing Timothy and the Ephesian church, but by extension, he instructs us as well. And in the context of the letter and the Ephesian church, the situation there, I believe that Paul's words concerning elders, that's the first seven verses, which I didn't read, but concerning elders, I believe that Paul's words can be summarized in this way.

Godly leaders are a critical necessity for godly churches. Godly leaders are a critical necessity for godly churches.

And I believe that when we consider the six verses that we just read about deacons, I think a similar summary is appropriate concerning what Paul says in these six verses about deacons.

Godly servants are a critical necessity for godly churches. When talking about the elders, it would be godly leaders are a critical necessity for godly churches.

And now talking about those who serve in the church, the deacons, I believe it would be right to summarize the words of Paul by saying that godly servants are a critical necessity for godly

churches.

[ 6 : 10 ] Now while the difference between the two might seem a bit cosmetic, I assure you that they are different. It's not just a cosmetic thing between them.

Elders are those who lead the church. And they must be godly men. On the other hand, deacons are those who serve the church and they too must be godly.

And although elders are primarily defined as leaders, it doesn't mean that they don't serve. Truth is, they do serve.

And they serve because part of good leadership is to be a good servant. But first and foremost, they are the leaders of the church. And likewise, although deacons are primarily defined as servants, this doesn't mean that no aspect of their work requires leadership.

Some aspects of diaconal work does require leadership in the area of service. But leadership and exercising authority do not define the office of deacon.

[ 7 : 25 ] Servanthood does. And so this morning, I've organized my thoughts for this message and this passage under two very simple headings.

And they are, number one, the deacon's office. And number two, the deacon's qualifications. So first, the deacon's office. When you read these six verses about deacons, there's really nothing in the verses that specifically tells us about what deacons do.

We can learn about what deacons do from the word itself. The word deacon, the meaning of that can tell us a lot about the work that deacons do.

In the New Testament, which is written in the Greek language, and certainly this letter to Timothy would have been written in Greek as well.

The word for deacon comes from a Greek word from which we get our English word deacon.

[ 8 : 34 ] deacon, and it means essentially someone who waits on tables, somebody who serves. It's like a serve in a restaurant. The Greek word is diakonos.

We get our English words diaconate and diaconal and deacon from that word. But deacons are servants. And again, in contrast to the elders, whose primary role is to lead in the church, deacons give themselves to serving in the local church.

I believe that the office of deacon is best understood by looking at Acts chapter 6. So I'm going to ask you to turn there with me.

Acts chapter 6. I want to read the first seven verses, make some comments, and we'll go back to 1 Timothy chapter 3. Acts chapter 6.

This is very early on in the life of the early church. And here's what Luke, the author of Acts, wrote.

[ 9 : 55 ] 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.

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.

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And 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 Nicholas, a proselyte from Antioch.

These they said before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 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.

[ 11 : 15 ] Now this passage gives us some insight into what church life was like in the early church in the early days. Verse 1 tells us that the number of disciples were increasing in number.

But then in the same verse we find that there was a problem. The Hellenists, those Jews who spoke Greek, were complaining against the Hebrews, or those who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, those Jews.

They were saying that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. So what we can see immediately is that not only was the church growing, but the church was also changing. It was no longer a purely Hebrew, Aramaic-speaking church. Jews from the dispersion, Jews who had been scattered around the world, and whose parents had relaxed their practice of Judaism, so much so that their children spoke Greek, which was the Greek back then, is what English is today.

It was like the language of commerce. It was the language that was commonly spoken. And these children spoke Greek, and really did not know Hebrew, or spoke very little Hebrew, to make them conversant in it.

[12:38] And they were complaining, these Hellenists, these Greek-speaking disciples, were complaining that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

And when you consider this problem, it really points to something bigger than just not getting food. It actually points to the issue of prejudice and discrimination.

The Hellenists were saying, essentially, how is it that the widows who are being neglected are all Greek-speaking? They're all Hellenists. They're being overlooked in the distribution of food.

And this complaint went to the apostles, and in verse 2, they called a church-wide meeting. They summoned all the disciples together, and they addressed the problem.

And when you consider the account, it seems like there was an expectation that the apostles were going to themselves deal with this problem and solve it for those who were complaining.

[13:45] They felt that the apostles oversaw the daily distribution of food. Maybe it'll be fair. Maybe they would be able to distribute the food in a fair manner.

And I think this is the reason they told the apostles. But the apostles said, as recorded in verse 2, it isn't right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

That's the first thing that the apostles told these disciples. And when you think about it, it took some courage to do that. It takes courage to tell people who feel strongly about something that you're not going to do it the way they want it done.

That's the first thing they told them. The second thing they told them is found in verse 3. In essence, they said, although we aren't going to do it, we have a plan on how to do it.

And they told them, you choose seven men from among yourselves and they need to have good reputation. They need to be full of the Spirit and wisdom and we will appoint them to this task of distributing food.

[14:52] They declined to do it themselves, but they had a plan on how to do it. Clearly, they thought about it. They felt that seven was enough to do it. Seven is not just a magic number.

I think seven was determined to be the number of men needed for the task of fairly distributing the food to the widows that they had.

They also not only determined the number of deacons, they also set the qualifications for the deacons and then they allowed the people, based on those qualifications, to choose those men who would have this responsibility.

And then the apostles would appoint them. The third thing they told the disciples is that they were going to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

Now, what is interesting about the seven men selected is that the seven men selected all have Greek names. And it raises the real possibility that these seven men were Hellenists, that they had some affinity to the people who were aggrieved in the situation.

[16:08] But it's interesting that in response to the complaint that was coming from these who were complaining, that these men all had Greek names.

And it helps us, I believe, to see that they were well-suited for the task. No doubt, Hebrew-speaking men who were of good reputation and full of wisdom.

They could have done the job as well. But it seems wise that they selected these individuals who had Greek names and who could identify with the particular situation.

This is the first account that we have in Scripture concerning the appointing of deacons. Now, let's look at the result of it, which we find in verse 7.

In verse 7, we see that 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.

[17:19] That's what Luke in Cypher tells us. And I think the reason is that the apostles continued to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word and the deacons cared for the pressing needs of the congregation ensuring that these widows were effectively cared for in the daily distribution of food.

Now, I believe that this account helps us to see some lessons from how the first deacons were appointed. First of all, notice that they were appointed out of need.

They didn't just start and say, we're going to appoint some deacons, but they appointed them out of need. A need arose, and so they appointed them. And they fulfilled two purposes.

They assisted the apostles, who were the elders of the church as well, and they served the church by ensuring that all the widows were effectively cared for. In our particular case, while we have numerous persons already serving in areas of need, we have been, I admit, negligent in formally commissioning them, and I take full responsibility for that, and we are seeking to correct that through the process that we are, that we have already embarked upon.

Now, I believe that while there are many lessons to be learned from this account, the main lesson to be learned from this account is that elders are to guard their priorities of prayer and the ministry of the word by appointing deacons to take care of responsibilities and any duty that would take the elders away from those two priorities of ministering the word and prayer.

[ 19 : 08 ] So, when we consider the office of deacon from scripture, we are able to say that the office of deacon is to be occupied by servants in the church who assist the elders by taking care of needs of the church so that the elders may maintain the priority of giving themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Now, while the character and spiritual qualifications of all deacons is the same, I think it's a logical conclusion that particular deacons are suited for particular tasks or particular kinds of diaconal work.

All of the same qualifications, but some are more suited than others for particular work.

And I'll elaborate on this point a little later in the message. But that's the office of deacon and that's what we should be thinking about in terms of what we are seeking to implement here at the church. Let's now consider the qualifications, the deacon's qualifications. And for this, we need to turn back to 1 Timothy chapter 3. Paul lays out the qualifications for deacons in verses 8 through 12 and they can be summarized under three descriptions.

[ 20 : 36 ] And I want us to pay close attention, let's pay close attention to these descriptions because we need to bear their mind as we go about affirming the individuals who will be presented as candidates for diaconal ministry.

The first is a dignified life. a dignified life. Deacons must live a dignified life.

And Paul describes the dignified life that deacons are to lead by referring to three aspects of their character in verse 8. The first is they must not be double-tongued.

They must not be double-tongued. Instead of using the term double-tongued, today we would say, well the person talks out of both sides of his mouth.

Or we would call the person two-faced. And while this is talking about speech, really the issue is deeper than that. It's an issue of character. It's an issue that is pointing to integrity.

[ 21 : 42 ] Deacons need to be trustworthy in their speech and they must not be people-pleasers because people-pleasers tend to change their position on issues depending on the people to please people.

People-pleasers don't have courage and character to consistently stand by their word and stand by their convictions no matter who's standing in front of them.

Recognizing the work of deacons and how it involves the private affairs of church members and others who are connected to the church. In his historical commentary on the pastoral epistles, Sir William Ramsey described the temptations that can arise for deacons to be double-tongued in this way.

Here's what he writes. Now there can be no doubt that the work of deacons was more closely connected with the indoor and family life of members of the congregation than the work of presbyters.

And by presbyters he means elders or pastors. The deacons had more intimate duties in the administration of charity and help where it was needed.

[ 22 : 56 ] They had to find out the needs of individuals to go about among the members of the congregation and to converse and to sympathize with them. There was great temptation to say too much to one person in one family or in one family and thus to be betrayed into inconsistency and self-contradiction in speaking to another.

Nothing is easier than for a person to slip in to the fault of double-tonguedness when he is trying to accommodate himself to various families in one congregation.

I think those are wise words that demonstrate an understanding of the reality of the kinds of situations those who are intimately involved in people's lives would face.

another aspect of the dignified life that Paul mentions in verse 8 is not addicted to much wine. Not addicted to much wine. This is a similar qualification for the elders and again concerning alcohol it is not a call for abstinence instead it is a call for temperance.

Deacons cannot afford to have their judgment impaired by alcohol or by any other substance that alters the mind. And the next aspect of leading a dignified life we find also in verse 8 he says that deacons are not to be greedy for dishonest gain or to put it another way they must not be lovers of money.

[ 24 : 37 ] Again this is a similar qualification for elders but perhaps this qualification recognizes some of the practical aspects of the work that deacons do and the fact that sometimes it entails handling resources financial and material and you can easily see how a person who doesn't have character a person who is untrustworthy a person who loves money would not be suited to distribute resources to the needy because he might be tempted to steal to steal food and sell it to steal other things clothing and sell it next thing you know he has a variety store selling this and that because he has been dishonest deacons must not be lovers of money because they can easily be tempted to steal and when we think about loving money and materialism those are learned habits we learn them we learn them by living in a world that's very materialistic and not guarding our hearts there's some other temptations that

I mean for example sexual temptation is biological and yes we must guard our hearts so that we don't feed that but in and of itself there's nothing about us that is natural to love money that is a learned love when we live in a materialistic society and we don't guard our hearts against it now I think it's important to know that Paul is not being exhaustive here when he talks about this dignified life that the deacons must lead he's not being exhaustive he's not covering every single thing that can be covered but the broad point is that a deacon must lead a life that is consistent with dignity a dignified life that's the first qualification the second qualification is the deacons must hold to sound doctrine look at verse 9 the way Paul says it is that they must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience here the faith is referred to as a mystery not in the sense of some unknown secret but in the sense of something that formerly was unknown that God has now revealed and I want you to see that from

Romans 16 verse 25 how the apostle Paul explains it he writes now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery notice that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed through the prophetic writings and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations according to the command of the eternal God to bring about obedience of faith to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ amen so Paul is referring to the gospel as a mystery in times past it was kept secret but now God has revealed it to us and his point is that deacons must be sound in the faith although deacons may not have a formal teaching role they are still servants of the

Lord and they are expected to minister God's word on a personal level with people they come into contact with and so they need to hold the sound doctrine with a very clear conscience and part of sound doctrine should be the very basic things that pertain to our faith things like believing in and holding to the inerrancy of scripture the belief that God's word is without error or fault in all that he teaches believing in the sufficiency of scripture that God's word is a sufficient guide for us in all matters of life and doctrine believing in the triunity of God that God is one yet God is three in the persons of father son and holy spirit believing in the deity of Christ they should understand the gospel the grace of God to undeserving sinners and they should be able to give wise godly counsel and encouragement from God's word that is holding to sound doctrine deacons need to hold to the mystery of the faith that they profess and third not only must deacons lead a dignified life and not only must they hold to sound doctrine deacons must have a stable family life we see this qualification verses 11 and 12 as in the case of the elders the qualifications speak to the norm they speak to what is the norm and what is expected it is expected in those days in particular that men would marry and to some extent today as well it was a given that men would marry but it does not mean that single men are excluded from serving as deacons in verse 11 if the deacon is married his wife is to be dignified not slanderous but sober minded and faithful in all things and then in verse 12 like the elders the deacon must be sexually faithful that's what it means to be the husband of one wife it doesn't mean that he can't be a person who's been divorced it means that he must be a one woman man now obviously if the deacon is single then he is called to a life of sexual purity and if he

is married and he has children he is called to manage them well he's called to manage his home well and then if you look in verse 10

Paul indicates that there needs to be some process by which deacons can be proven some kind of a probationary period of sorts and just as we see in Acts chapter 6 where the congregation played a role in the choice of deacons I think in a similar way they should play a role some role in the appointment of deacons today because they would know some of the candidates for the diaclal ministry better than the elders in some cases who may be appointing them at the end of the day so their input then becomes very vital now I need to alert you to something in verse 11 verse 11 can be read in two different ways if you have an ESV Bible translation you will note that at the bottom of the page there is a note 4 that gives an alternative reading or an alternative translation the ESV translators decided upon their wives likewise must and so did the translators of the [ 32 : 13 ] New International version and the King James version but as the footnote in the ESV Bible indicates it can also be translated as women and that's because the Greek word from which we get this word that is used here this Greek word *gynekas* is the word that we get *gynecology* from it can mean wives or women it was used interchangeably those who believe that wives is the correct translation argue that it is unlikely that the apostle Paul would use such a common term to designate an office in the church they don't believe that he would use this word for women or wives to talk about the office of deacon and they also argue that wives in verse 11 seems to be the most natural reading of the text because of the very next verse verse 12 where the same Greek word is used and is translated wife so they say it seems best to translate with the same word with the same meaning in two consecutive verses same word same meaning so they said if it's wives and one it should be wives and the other one because they are together now those who argue on the other side that in verse 11

Paul is referring to female deaconesses female deacons or deaconesses they say women is the better translation than wives and they say this because of the view that it would seem strange for Paul to be laying down qualifications for the deacon's wives when he did not lay down any qualifications for the elders wives he was silent on qualifications for them so they're saying that seems unusual that he is now giving stipulation to the wives of the deacons when he didn't do that for the elders and the elders have a greater responsibility so their wives should have a greater requirement to have these qualities is the way the argument goes so those are the two views now from my personal study of this verse and this section of scripture dealing with elders and deacons I believe that in context in context we'll be find here I believe that wives is the best rendering of the Greek word so I believe that in verse 11 Paul is actually talking about the wives of the deacons not deaconesses and I believe that the reason that he singles out the wives of the deacons is that the nature of diaconal ministry which is a serving role in the church the wives of the deacons can share in that serving role with their husbands and sometimes the very work that they may be called upon to do alongside their husbands is work that's more suited for women to do and they could bring a very valuable contribution in the ministry of their husbands who are deacons and I think the reason Paul did not mention the wives of the elders in verses 1-7 is that the nature of the elders work is very different it's not serving role it's a leading role it's a governing role it's a role of taking oversight and responsibility and governing the church and scripture is very clear on that that that is a male function so I think that's the reason that

Paul does not address the wives of the elders because the wives of the elders cannot share in the actual work of what the elders do in terms of ministering the word and governing the church and I hope that's helpful to try to see why that might be that Paul addresses the wives of the deacons but doesn't address the wives of the elders so this continues to be debated among churches and churches have to decide where they land on the issue I think that it should be clear to us that this passage that we are considering this morning cannot settle the issue it can't settle the issue as to whether there can be female deacons serving in the church this passage does not settle it we have to look elsewhere in scripture to draw this conclusion listen to what Phil Riken writes in his commentary on 1st

Timothy summarizing this particular issue he writes if the office of deaconess is not established in 1st Timothy 3 the diaconal ministry of women is certainly present elsewhere in the bible new testament women frequently carried out diaconal ministry in the broad sense of the word consider Dorcas who was full of good works and acts of charity acts 9 36 or Lydia who closed the philippians in purple acts 16 11 through 15 or tryphena and tryphosa women described as workers in the lord in

romans 16 12 or especially phoebe who was a patron of many and is identified as a servant of the church i can crave literally a deaconess romans 12 1 through 2 now obviously times have changed church needs have changed and the needs vary from church to church and from place to place and many of these needs are best met by women or they can be equally met by women who are serving as deacons take for example home visitation or hospital visitation of women who are sick clearly that can be more effectively carried out by female deacons than men and certainly if there's a lead male deacon maybe his wife alongside who would be able to give that kind of particular care and attention in his book a theology as big as the city ray back points out that in

[ 39 : 32 ] Egypt during the second century deaconesses provided nursing mothers who sat in the public square often under pagan statues while other women went up and down the streets to collect the unwanted babies abandoned in the night they brought them nursed bathed!

and raised them! And again Phil Ryken who's a pastor and theologian and the president of a college he points out that such ministry this ministry that Bach talks about such ministry was characteristic of women throughout the Christian world and at least by the third century so we're not dealing with something that's novel in terms of deaconesses in the church Ryken also points to a survey of women's ministry in the early church by J.M.

Ross and he points out that deaconesses served as doorkeepers visited the sick helped women when they were being baptized and they also cared for orphans and the fourth century John Chrysostom described the order of deaconesses to be necessary and useful and honorable in the church so I believe that the witness of scripture and church history supports the service of women in diaconal work even though churches may vary on what they call them and what you find in many cases in churches as well there are some churches that take a position to let deacons be exclusively male and often times when you look at what they have those men doing much of it or I shouldn't say much of it but some of it really is what the elders should do and perhaps that's why they have taken that approach but I think it is a distortion to take a serving role and give functions that belong to the office of elders in verse 13 the apostle

Paul concludes by referring to what can be described as the deacon's reward notice that when speaking about the office of elder in verse 1 Paul states the nobility of the eldest office before listing the qualifications but here as he is speaking about the deacons he states the nobility of the deacon's office at the end of the qualifications and he says those who serve well receive a good standing for themselves and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus he seems to be saying that those who serve and wait on God's people grow in their understanding or standing among God's people because of their work and they grow in their confidence of their faith the gospel as they see the gospel no doubt at work now when we think of the accolum ministry I believe that the greatest motivation to serve as a deacon or a deaconess for those who meet the qualifications is that Christ himself is the chief deacon Christ himself is the chief servant in Mark's gospel chapter 10 verse 45 Jesus said for even the son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many the highest form of serving in the life of Jesus was that he gave his life as a ransom for many and deacons and deaconesses are not called to literally give their lives but they are called to give of themselves they are called to serve in sacrificial ways and in so doing they walk in the footsteps of the chief deacon the chief servant the

[ 44 : 00 ] Lord Jesus Christ and I pray this morning that God grant us much grace as we go through with our diaconal affirmation process and I pray that the result will be that we will have more than enough servants in this church to assist the elders in caring for the church and allowing the elders to focus on the priorities of the word and prayer let's pray together