

The Dignified Knights of Christ's Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Today's sermon text is 1 Timothy chapter 3 starting at verse 8. This is sermon number 6 on our 7 part series on life in the Father's house, the biblical church.

As I read this, remember that this is God's inspired, inerrant, infallible, clear, and sufficient word. It's God's very own word for you. God's word says, This is the word of God.

Thanks be to God indeed. Let's pray. Oh Father, please speak to your people. You are the chief shepherd of our souls and we praise you that you call up servants.

You call up laborers into your field and the fields are ripe for harvest. We thank you, Lord, that we know the preciousness of every soul. The soul is so precious that you yourself died to save your people.

We pray, Lord, that now through the ministry of your word, you will equip this church. You will grow us, edify us, mature us, make our roots go deeper so that you will be glorified in this congregation.

[1 : 49] We ask for Christ's sake. Amen. Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, today I want to talk with you about the dignified knights of Christ's kingdom.

Isn't that a beautiful way to describe what a deacon is? A deacon is a dignified knight of Christ's kingdom. We're going to walk through seven or so questions about deacons and then the blessing for deacons.

So first, what is a deacon? I'm going to have you turn to a few different places today. The first one is please turn to Philippians chapter 1, verse 1. As you're turning there, listen to how Charles Spurgeon spoke of the perception of deacons in the 1800s in England.

Quote, Maybe that's your thought as a deacon is a dragon.

It's one that you have to get around and fight within the ministry. We'll find out soon. That was not how Spurgeon viewed the deacons within his own biblical church. But I think we will see perhaps why that does become the case in many congregations.

[3 : 12] So what is a deacon? The term deacon simply means servant. So in a broad sense, all Christians serve. All Christians serve both Christ and his body.

So in the broadest meaning of that word deacon or to serve, it's the sense used in Romans 14, verse 18. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and men.

So what's a deacon? A deacon is a servant. But there's also a biblical office called deacon. You've turned to Philippians 1, chapter 1. Listen to the three groups of people that Paul addresses at the church at Philippi.

He says, So as he looks at the congregation, he sees all the saints.

Within all those saints are officers. The two offices that he calls out are overseers, which is synonymous with bishops, pastors, elders, and deacons.

[4 : 18] So what is a deacon? A deacon is a biblical office. Our constitution puts it this way, that Jesus Christ alone is the head of his church, citing Colossians 1, 18.

And he has ordained that individual churches should be governed by himself. And how does Christ govern his church? He does it through officers whom Christ appoints.

We saw in Acts 20 how when Christ appoints, he does it through the church as well. And these officers are endowed by his spirit with the gifts and graces needed to accomplish their work, citing Ephesians 4, which we have also seen in the series.

So deacon is a servant. Deacon is a biblical office. And deacon is a dignified office. Look at a new text there that we read. 1 Timothy 3, look at verse 8.

We're told deacons must be dignified. I love how this poem by Ella Wilcox in the year 1919 put it. Deacons, she wrote, are knights of truth.

[5 : 21] And she addresses them directly. Listen to this, potential deacons and officers. Sir Knight, have you pondered the meaning of all you have heard and been told?

Have you strengthened your heart for its weaning from vices and faults loved of old? Will you honor in hours of temptation your promises noble and grand?

Will your spirit be strong to do battle with wrong and having done all to stand? That's what a deacon is. A deacon is a knight of truth.

We'll turn next, please, to Acts. Turn to the book of Acts chapter 6. As you're turning there, let me pose this question to you. If a church has elders, as we saw last week, why then are deacons needed?

And here's where the problems creep in. I think it's common practice that most churches in America, at least, operate in an unbiblical way. They operate as if there were no spiritually qualified officers.

[6 : 26] Rather, there's just representatives on a governing board. Well, the church is not a parent-teacher organization. The church is not your homeowner's association.

They just have volunteer board members. You've turned to Acts 6. Let's look at verse 2 together. In Acts 6, what we have are proto-deacons. This is like the forerunners.

Do you remember Stephen and how he was martyred, proclaiming the gospel, and the Lord opened up the heavens, and he could behold the face of Jesus, and his own face glowed as he died. Well, before Stephen preached that sermon, listen to how he was appointed in this office of serving, which sets the pattern now for the church.

And here, in this case, we have the 12 apostles appointing seven servants. And that sets the pattern for elders appointing deacons. So, Acts 6, 2, we read that the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples.

So, everyone who's a disciple of Jesus, all the members of the church, gather around. And the apostles said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

[7 : 34] It is not right that we give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. See, the apostles set the pattern for the church. And what is it that we should learn?

One application I drew for myself is that elders ought to always lead by example. See, these apostles were, they were serving the tables. They were taking care of these Greek widows when no one else would.

And they would also preach. As long as they can do both well, they should. But they also had to draw the line. They had to say, It's not right that we give up preaching. It's not just deeds.

We need the word to be ministered. So, if the preaching of the word starts to be neglected because the physical needs are so great, then the elders must never give up preaching the word.

But elders must do first and best that for which they were set apart. See, each office has a purpose. Our constitution sets that out.

[8 : 30] The purpose and function of the deacon is this. The office of deacon was ordained by the apostles to enable the ministers of the word to concentrate on the specific functions of their office, namely prayer and the ministry of the word.

So, elders must not neglect preaching, teaching, and counseling because those are ministries of the word to God's people. Mark Dever pointed out that deacons serve to care for the physical and financial needs of the church.

And they do so in a way that heals divisions. It brings unity under the word. It supports the leadership of the elders. Without the service of deacons, the elders will be freed.

Without the service of deacons, the elders will not be freed to devote themselves to praying and serving the word of God to the people. That's the end of Mark Dever's quote.

So, conclusion, if a church has elders, why are deacons needed? And it's because elders need deacons to serve the physical needs of the body. And deacons need elders to lead spiritually.

[9 : 37] Next question, what is our biblical pattern for setting apart deacons in the service of the church? We'll stay in Acts 6 there. See what's the next verse? Acts 6, 3.

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

So, the work of deacons, it was assigned by the apostles. They said, we will appoint this duty to them. The deacons did not make decisions for the whole church. Rather, the congregation was sought as a way of giving that vote of confidence.

Pick out from among you men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom. Our constitution sets forth an advisory ballot where the members can nominate men within the congregation who they believe fit that criteria of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom.

And after they've been nominated, they're tested for six months at least. And then if they receive a two-thirds vote, then the elders then have the authority to appoint them to that office.

[10:52] So, the congregation gets to put the brakes on and be part of that testing as well as the advising. The next verse, Acts 6, verse 4 says, We, these are the apostles, the ministers of the word, we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

One commentator pointed out, Deacons are primarily responsible for administering the benevolent and business affairs of the church. The deacons, therefore, fulfill the duties of their office in cooperation with and under the responsibility, ultimately, of the elders.

Some deacons, though, were also gifted in other areas of ministry and they were at liberty to use those gifts. We just mentioned Stephen, how he stood up. He was an evangelist and he's declaring the gospel to unbelievers.

So, deacons are not limited to physical service, but they must be engaged in physical service to be deacons. Reflect on this.

Are you such a man? Do you aspire to be a man full of the spirit, full of wisdom, that's dignified before the congregation, of good repute?

[12:07] Back to Ella Wilcox's poem, Will you ever be true to a brother in actions as well as in creed? Will you stand by his side as no other could stand in the hour of his need?

Well, let's turn to our last text next. Please turn to 1 Timothy chapter 3. This is the text we read at the beginning. As you're turning there, I'll pose the question, How ought you, congregation, evaluate men who may become deacons?

How ought you evaluate them? You know you have a part in nominating. You know you have a part in testing and then ultimately voting to affirm a deacon.

So, what's your criteria to evaluate? In 1 Timothy 3, let's start at verse 8. Deacons likewise. The likewise is in reference to the first seven verses of this chapter, which break down the qualifications of an elder.

And so, you see that the deacons are considered like an elder in the spiritual qualification. So, spiritually, deacons and elders are standing shoulder to shoulder, spiritually mature, spiritually qualified in the same way that their functions and their gifting will be complementary.

[13:24] Elders desire the task of overseeing. Elders aspire to do that work of being able to teach and to edify. And elders must rule well. And deacons, their wives are included in the criteria.

Their wives must share the husband's love for the people in the congregation. And their wives also must show maturity. There's no qualification given for an elder's wife. The calling is on that man. But both offices, elder and deacon, stand shoulder to shoulder. They are spiritually equal before God. The same weight of spiritual requirement is on both.

So, spiritually, deacons likewise must be qualified as elders. Let's pick up on that same verse. See, deacons also must be, in one word, trustworthy.

Look at verse 8. Deacons must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. Deacons must be men who deserve respect.

[14:27] They must be honorable. They must have the fruit of the Spirit increasingly displayed in their lives. They must be filled with a love for God that overflows into a love for God's people.

They must have a high view of Christ and a high view of His church. So, as you look around in the congregation, you think, if this church is a fortress, an outpost in the kingdom of Christ, who's a man that we want on the tower?

Who's a man that we want at the gate, dragging in the wounded soldiers? Who is noble? Who is honorable? And who will sacrifice in such a way within the fortress of King Jesus?

They must be trustworthy. They must not be double-tongued, Paul wrote. Double-tongued could mean two different things. It could mean saying one thing to one person, something different to another.

Or it could just mean that you say one thing but do another. In both cases, you would be disqualified. That's double-tongued. So, they must be spiritually qualified. They must be trustworthy.

[15:32] And the last word sums it up. They must be blameless. They must be blameless. Look at verse 9. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Verse 10. Let them also be tested first, then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Charles Spurgeon said, If deacons cannot be trusted, they ought not be deacons at all. But if they are worthy of their office, they are worthy of our full confidence. Our Constitution says, Elders will recommend men that are members.

And those men must be tested for six months before a formal vote. That's intimidating, isn't it?

That's daunting. How am I going to be tested for six months?

And how can anyone consider themselves blameless before God? Well, congregation, we need to follow the pattern given to us. And during this period, the members must be asked to be in earnest prayer for the deacons.

[16:39] They and their families will face spiritual battle while they're being tested and certainly once they're in office. And also, during this time, it's your responsibility to bring any information forward to the elders that may be useful for the purpose of either commending or disqualifying prospective candidates.

You are watching out for Christ's bride. And is it possible for anyone to consider you blameless and worthy of being appointed?

Well, take encouragement from Charles Spurgeon's words. Listen to how he described the deacons at the first congregation where he served. Spurgeon said, May it be said of us.

Next question. Does the Bible support the office of deaconess? Well, women were certainly important supporters in Christ's ministry.

In Luke 8 verses 1 through 3, we read how the women, they were given by name. They ministered unto Jesus out of their own substance. So they had resources that they managed for the sake of Christ's ministry and of Paul's ministry.

[18:13] We read that Lydia was a woman of means and Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila, was a fellow tent maker of Paul. So they were using their means as well to support the ministry of Christ through the church.

On one hand, we read in 1 Timothy 2.12, Paul said, I do not permit a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over a man.

And so regardless of your conclusion about the role of deacon and how that applies to women, that is made very clear that the men do not get a, you know, be on the back seat.

The men are called to step up when the Lord calls you and take that responsibility and to take that authority that's been delegated by Christ on behalf of the church. We read in our sermon text for today the tricky verse, and it's verse 11.

The more I've studied it, I'll tell you, though, it's not too tricky to me anymore. Verse 11 of 1 Timothy 3 says, Wives or women, it could be rendered either way.

[19:19] Likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Now, the natural reading, it makes you pause.

Who is in view here? Is it all of the women within the congregation? Or is it women attached to these one-woman men, these deacons that are men?

Because to better understand the context of who is being referred to in verse 11, we need to look at the verse right before and the verse right after. The verse right before says the deacon must be tested.

So a natural reading makes you realize that who is in view when you're testing the deacon, it's the person closest to him. It's his wife. And now look at the next verse, verse 12.

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their households well.

So it's these men who are deacons that are in view in the verse right before and in the verse right after.

[20:17] And the context is testing the man's life. These women, they must be dignified, not slanderers.

It reminds me of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Lady Piety. They must be sober-minded. That reminds us of Lady Prudence. And they must be faithful in all things. That reminds us of Lady Charity.

And these ladies, these three ladies of the church, they were the ones who ministered to Christian on his pilgrimage at the Palace Beautiful. The Palace Beautiful, in his analogy, it's an extended metaphor.

It was the church. That's the Palace Beautiful. It's the church. So within the church, you will learn from these godly women practical holiness. That's Lady Piety. In the world, you are in the world, but you're set apart to be God's hands and feet.

You will learn prudence, how to walk in the wisdom of God's word. And you will learn charity. Charity means love, to be full of faith in Christ, which overflows in love for others.

[21 : 19] So I think the natural reading and looking at our confession of faith and also our constitution, we can affirm confessionally that the office of deacon is designed by God for men.

The term deaconess had not been developed until much later. So that's how our church constitution sets it up. The elders shall nominate to the congregation a fitting number of men who evidence the scriptural qualifications for that office, according to the church's current needs.

I can empathize with the challenges of this doctrine and this teaching, and I encourage your liberty of conscience to even disagree with my conclusions or what the constitution sets forth from our confession.

And I can't imagine this church or any church without such godly women serving in many different and important ways. But Reformed Heritage Church teaches that biblically all Christians are to serve Christ and his church.

There are many ways for each one to grow and to serve, and that men must be called up into the office of deacon. So finally, the blessings for deacons.

[22 : 42] Look at verse 13. For those who serve well as deacons, they gain good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. It sounds like a principle of works, doesn't it?

Deacons who serve well, they gain a good standing for themselves. Hold on. Don't they have their standing as being justified by the finished work of Christ alone? Yes, they do.

Good catch. But deacons, by serving well, what does that mean to gain a good standing within the church? I think the rest of the verse explains it. This means that as you serve as the deacon, as you show God's love for the people, and he fills you with more love for his church than you ever knew you could find inside of you, you gain great confidence in your faith that is in Christ Jesus by standing in this place that you've been called up into as an officer of the church.

So church, your application is to look around. When you see those men and their wives serving the church in many ways, encourage them, thank them.

Consider what one week of worship together here would be like without them and point that out to them. Commend them. Tell them that you are praying for them. And then consider nominating them when that time comes.

[24 : 08] Spurgeon wanted us to think that way too. He encouraged the church to ponder that. He said, Deprive the church of her deacons and she would be bereaved of her most valiant sons.

Their loss would shake the pillars of our spiritual house. But thanks be to God that such a calamity will never befall us. For the great head of the church in mercy to the church will always raise up a faithful succession of men who will use the office well and earn unto themselves a good decree and much boldness in the faith.

I want to encourage every single one here that this spiritual criteria for deacons and their wives, it's a criteria given to all of us. Every Christian ought to aspire toward that.

It's held out to every single person. You must strive to become qualified and to not disqualify yourself by your life. We must all hold to that mystery of the faith in Christ.

We must all strive to gain more and more confidence in our faith with a clear conscience. And last, I want to talk to you future deacons.

[25 : 20] Don't disqualify yourself. And if God calls you through a church like this, make up your mind to say yes. Step up into that good standing of this noble office.

Hear the words of the poem again. Sir, knight of the world's oldest order. Sir, knight of the army of God. You have crossed the strange mystical border.

The ground floor of truth you have trod. You have entered the sanctum sanctorum, which leads to the temple above, where you come as a stone and a Christ chosen one in the kingdom of friendship and love.

You might be thinking, I'm not a noble knight. My conscience accuses me. I'm weak. I'm afraid. I am not faithful enough.

Then you trust in the great faithfulness of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him you have pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, like we sing, his own dear presence to cheer and to guide you.

[26 : 35] He will give you strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. You can say blessings are all mine in Christ with 10,000 beside. If you love Christ, you will serve his bride well.

May King Jesus call up these dignified knights of his kingdom. Amen. Amen.