

ON DEACONS AND THEIR WORK AND QUALIFICATIONS

If you were to ask “What word do we have from the Lord himself about the work and qualifications of deacons?” I would have to say, we do not have a single word. That is not to say that there is not a word from the Lord, but it is not a word from the Lord himself. We do have a word, and it comes from the pen of one who considered himself to have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). That word Paul gave us is found in the **3rd chapter of 1 Timothy**. I invite you to open your Bibles and let’s reason about these things together.

The elders announced last Lord’s Day that they are beginning a process of finding and appointing additional deacons. They are asking each of us to put forward the names of those men we think might be capable and willing to serve in that capacity. That is their way of soliciting our involvement. It is also a way for us as a body to fulfill our responsibility in being the church of Christ. As we read Paul’s letters, especially in these two letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus, it is obvious that the Lord had some specific things in mind for the church. Near the end of the 3rd chapter of 1 Timothy, Paul writes,

“I hope to come to you, soon (he is writing to his young co-worker Timothy), but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.”

So Paul was addressing how things were to be done in local church, and some of that dealt with the leadership. In the first 7 verses of this 3rd chapter, Paul talks about the role and qualifications for bishops. They are also called overseers or elders. Then beginning in verse 8, Paul addresses the qualifications for another group of men who are to be considered and appointed as special servants. They are called deacons, which means “servants.” Well, that is what the elders are asking us to do at this present time.

I am sure some of you have questions especially with regard to the qualifications. That’s why I chose to bring a lesson on this matter today so that you as you are considering this matter, and the lesson that I had planned for today, I will bring it, the Lord willing next. Please make a note of that, next Lord’s Day, the morning lesson will be, “Love Says It Best.”

For this morning, let us consider a lesson on the work and qualifications for a deacon.

As some of you may know already, the word 'deacon' comes from the Greek word diakonos...literally it means "one who executes the commands of another,

b. In the New Testament, it is translated by at least three different words:

- 1) 'minister' - e.g., [Ro 13:4](#); [1Ti 4:6](#)
- 2) 'servant' - e.g., [Jn 12:26](#); [Ro 16:1](#)
- 3) 'deacon' - e.g., [1Ti 3:8,12](#); [Php 1:1](#)

All three words are translated from the same Greek word. Now we might wonder, why do they do that? Why can’t they just translate words the same way every time? The reason they can’t

do that is because a word is not always used in the same way. In the Greek New Testament, for example, the word *ekklesia* is usually translated “church,” but it can also be translated as “assembly.” In Acts 19:32, for example, this word, *ekklesia* is used with reference to a civic assembly in Ephesus, more akin to what we might call, a mob. In instances like that it is necessary to use a different English word to convey the different ways a word is used. In the case of *diakonos*, sometimes it is used with reference to an ordinary household servant. Sometimes it is used with reference to someone who has been assigned a task, and in several special cases, such as we have here in 1 Timothy 3, and Philippians 1:1, it is used of some specially appointed servants of the church. While all Christians are to be servants in a general sense, servants of God, servants of one another, there are some Christians who are to be ordained to a special work with the church. Such men are deacons.

In **1 Timothy 3:13**, Paul says those deacons who serve well "*obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith*"

What exactly is the service they are to render? We don't have a lot of information in the New Testament to go on. Paul mentions them in Philippians 1:1 as he sends greets to the church which is at Philippi along with its elders and deacons.

Some people (I would count myself as one of them) believe that we have the prototype of the deacons in the appointment of the seven servants in **Acts 6:1-6**. A problem had arisen in the Jerusalem church, and while a daily distribution of food was being made to those in need, it seems that a particular segment was being ignored or slighted; they were called the Grecian widows. These would have been Jewish widows who had become Christians and were living in Jerusalem, but had come from outside of Judea, mostly from the Greek nations. The Judean widows seemed to be getting the attention while the Grecian widows were being neglected. This problem was brought to the attention of the 12 apostles who then urged the congregation of believers to do what the elders are asking us to do—look out from among themselves and find seven men, who seemed to be qualified in the right way and who could be appointed to serve in that specific ministry. That's what they did and very soon seven men were appointed to a ministry, or *diakonia*.

Generally it is regarded that deacons are servants of the church, who are appointed to assist the elders in getting certain things done that are more temporal in nature as compared with the more spiritual work that is done by the elders.

Well, someone might think, if that is what a deacon is and what a deacon does, then just find anybody. Anyone who is willing and able should be tapped to be a deacon. But no, surprisingly, that isn't what the Word of God tells us. Let's listen to the kind of things Paul says must be true of those who are to serve the church as deacons. Let's read together, **1 Timothy 3, beginning in verse 8**. I am reading from the ESV, and in several places, the wording will likely be a little different from what it is in your Bible.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9) They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10) And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11) Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12) Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13) For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus*

Paul says, deacons—these servants, ministers in their own right because they are responsible for a specific ministry—*must be dignified*. Your version may say *grave*, or *men of dignity*. I like the way the NIV puts it, *“men worthy of respect.”* You don’t become a man worthy of respect because you are appointed to be a deacon, you become a deacon because you are a man worthy of respect.

He must *not be double-tongued*. Just about all versions render that the same way, and the reason is that there is not much a better way to express that. The NIV has *“he must be sincere.”* That may help a little, but I like the idea of double-tongue better. A deacon must not be a man who says one thing today, and something else tomorrow; who says one thing to this person, but says something different to another person.

He must *not be addicted (or given) to much wine*. Please understand the emphasis here is upon the idea of addiction. I believe a natural reading and understanding of this idea is that in the ancient world, as it is in many places still today, wine was commonly served. It was one of the few things people could drink that was relatively free from harmful germs. A couple of chapters over (5), Paul will tell Timothy, *“no longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”* Perhaps Timothy had a practice of not drinking any wine but because Paul knew he was having some health issues, he told him to start taking a little wine. This wasn’t for the sake of pleasure sake, but for the sake of his stomach. I do not drink alcoholic beverages, having grown up in a home where alcoholism was very destructive, so I would encourage everyone to stay away from alcohol completely, but if we make a rule about that, we have gone beyond what the scriptures teach. As people who are committed to the authority of Scriptures, we do not get the liberty to change what we do not like, or to add or subtract what we please.

Deacons must also not be *“greedy for dishonest gain*. Some versions say, *“greedy of filthy lucre.”* The NIV says, *“not pursuing dishonest gain.”* Greediness of almost anything is prohibited in the Bible, and that certainly applies to money. Paul says over in **chapter 6**, *“Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.”* Again, Paul is not saying that deacons cannot be rich, or work for money, but that they must not be greedy for dishonest gain. The emphasis there is upon doing things for money that are dishonest, or questionable.

Deacons—**verse 9**, must be men who “*hold the mystery of the faith with a clear (or pure) conscience.*” That is simply saying what Paul said in **Titus 2:10**: “*...showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.*” Being addicted to wine would not do that. Being involved in dishonest dealings for the sake of money would not do that. If our faith says one thing, but the manner of our living says another, that contradiction will undermine the cause of Christ and must not be practiced, especially by those whose appointment and ministry is so closely connected to Christ’s church.

And then Paul says something that sometimes does not get very much attention. Paul says, “*And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.*” That verse needs to be read along with verse 9, and it is telling us to make sure of these men before you appoint them. Addictions and dishonest behavior are things that are usually kept hidden so there must be some careful inquiries made before appointing anyone to the role of a servant in the church. The NIV says, “*and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.*”

Verse 11, Paul says, “*Their wives likewise must be dignified (or grave).*” What was said about the deacon himself in verse 8, should also equally apply to his wife. She too must be a woman worthy of respect.

Now some people might think, “Whoa! You mean we are going to be looking the man’s wife and family?” Yes, Paul tells us to do that because it would be very hard for a deacon to fulfill his ministry well if his wife’s manner of life is a distraction and problem to him.

So Paul says, she must not be a “*slanderer.*” The NIV says, “*not a malicious talker.*” In other words, she must not be someone who goes around talking about everyone and everything in unkind and ungracious ways.

A deacon’s wife must also be *sober-minded*, which may parallel the idea that a deacon is not to be addicted to much wine. Some versions simply say, “sober” or “temperate.” She must also be “*faithful (or trustworthy) in all things.*” In other words, look at her life, as you do the man’s life, and see if there is any habit or fault that may bring dishonor to both her husband and Christ’s church.

Verse 12, Paul says, “*A deacon must be the husband of but one wife.*” This has both a positive and negative force to it. In the first place, it is telling us that a deacon must be married; he must have a wife, but, prohibitively, he must not have more than one wife. That seems simple enough but people want to know, does that mean “one at a time,” or one wife period?

Obviously this passage would prohibit a polygamist from serving as a deacon, just as the same idea in verse 2 would prohibit a polygamist from serving as an elder, or bishop. We shouldn’t assume, however, that it would have been okay if someone other than an elder or deacon had several wives. The scriptures make it clear that would be fornication. But what if a man is

divorced and remarried, possibly several times? And what if he did that several times before obeying the gospel? What if his wife died and he has remarried? Or what if his wife died, and he did not remarry? These are very real questions and they are not easy to answer. I believe each of you will have to answer for yourself. Every congregation, under the leadership of its elders, will have to wrestle through these things to determine what they will or won't accept.

I don't have the wisdom of Solomon to know with absolute certainty "what about this or what about that" situation. I know there are some who do think they know with certainty, but I am not one of them. I don't think that makes me weak in the faith. Neither am I saying that the person who is convinced one way or another is wrong. These are tough questions, but I would say, we must always be careful to strive for peace and unity, and not simply having my way.

When I first began preaching many years, the church I was working with began considering appointing elders for the first time, at least in many years. I wrote five or six brethren that I believed to be wise and godly men, asking them these very questions. "What does this mean?", and "What about this or that situation?" I wrote brother Jimmy Allen and brother Neale Pryor at Harding University. I wrote brother Joe Alley at York College. I wrote brother Reuel Lemmons who was editor of the Firm Foundation paper. I wrote another well-known preacher from Freed-Hardeman College, and I wrote the preacher who baptized me up in Augusta, Kansas. There was some consensus among them, but there were also some differences. That showed me that good, godly, men can disagree, and when that happens, it may mean the matter is not black and white. It may be a little gray and hard to understand. Peter said that there are some things that Paul wrote that are "*hard to understand*," so we should not be surprised that there are some tough questions about some things.

What is my opinion about these things? Well, what difference does it matter what my opinion is, or your opinion for that matter? When something gets down to a matter of opinion, then as some have said, "let there be liberty." I believe it is more important for a congregation to be agreed on what they can live with in an effort to honor God and His word.

Well, Paul continues, deacons must also be "*managing their children and their own households well*." I don't think that requirement is difficult to understand, but respect the fact that this may be one of those things that is somewhat relative. What you consider "well" may not be what someone else considers "well." Do all of his children have to be baptized believers? What if one or more of his children become unfaithful, maybe even begin living a dissolute life after they leave home? Does that disqualify him? What if all of his children have left home? Is what Paul wrote here only applicable to those men whose children are still in the house? Well, again, you can see, these are some good, but tough questions, and probably no one answer is going to satisfy everyone's understanding. My suggestion is that if you have some of these concerns, go and talk to that person and share with him your views and your concerns, and see if you can come to agreement.

I would recommend that procedure in any event. Go and talk with the men that you may want to propose the elders consider further. Ask them if they mind you putting forth their name?

Ask them if they know of any reason why they might not be qualified. Ask them about any concern you might have, especially if there is something that concerns you about one or more of the things presented in these verses.

Finally, notice Paul says in **verse 13**, that *“those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”* Being a deacon is not just some menial job that just anyone and everyone can do. We need to see it as a service to the body of Christ, which means it is a service to Christ himself, and therefore it deserves and demands one’s very best effort. Being a leader, even if it is in the role of a servant, is never an easy task, and that is why the standard is set pretty high. As the Marine Corps famously puts it, “We need a few, good men.”

As we engage in this process, let us do it with a positive spirit, and let us cover it with prayer. Let’s pray that not only will we be successful in appointing some additional deacons, but that we did it in such a way that the church continues to enjoy peace and unity. Let this be a matter to be taken seriously, by both those who may be asked to serve and by those who will be served by their appointment. I think the words of **1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13** are also applicable and appropriate here. Paul said, *“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13) and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”*

Invitation

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