



“Requirements”
1 Timothy 3:8-13

Idea: Deacons are leading servants in the church deputized to serve alongside the elders, executing their vision and freeing them up to shepherd the church.

Intro: A church was forced to ask an associate pastor to resign due to some prolonged relational disagreement and tension. This decision greatly hurt and confused about thirty members. They loved the man and did not understand why the situation could not be worked out. This group’s trust in the elders was fractured, which resulted in the elders feeling unable to pastor them. The two groups needed a mediator, someone to stand in the gap. One of the deacons, Jeff, rose to the occasion. He stepped into this delicate situation, which was fraught with tension, and absorbed the shock. Amazingly, the church’s relationship with the associate pastor was reconciled. He ended up staying in the church for another several months until a ministry opportunity elsewhere came along, and not a single person in the church left over the issue.

The healing and restoration that took place was only possible because of Jeff’s wisdom and tenacity in pursuing peace. Most likely without his help and mediation the associate pastor and many members would have left the church. The elders’ and members’ trust in Deacon Jeff, however, enabled him to be a problem solver. His servant leadership brought about the beauty of biblical reconciliation. This story is one of many that Matt Smethurst shares in his book (*Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church*), highlighting the ministry of deacons.

Today, we continue with message #3 in a three-part series on deacons. As I mentioned the last two weeks, it is likely that your perspective on deacons in the church has largely been shaped by your experience with them. Experience, of course, is important and influential, but as believers who seek to live our lives and build our church on the foundation of God’s Word, it is imperative that we know and understand what the Bible says about deacons. For this reason, we are taking these Sundays to learn and better understand this office in the church. One of the reasons we are doing so is because this summer we are looking to restructure and redeploy our deacon ministry. We believe this change will enable our deacons to better care for our church by serving in the areas of their passion and giftedness. This evening, in a special called members’ meeting, we will lay out for you what this change will encompass. In preparation for that meeting and in order for us to better understand this office, over these three Sundays, I am teaching on the roles, responsibilities, and requirements of these leading servants.

Again, as I have pointed out the last two weeks, the New Testament lays out two offices of leadership in the local church. The first office is referred to as elders (πρεσβύτερος), overseers (ἐπίσκοπος), or pastors (ποιμήν).

All three terms work together synonymously to describe the same office (Acts 20:17-28; 1 Pet 5:1-2). The second office is referred to as deacons (διάκονος). Together, they work to shepherd and care for the members of the church.

The two offices of the church described and prescribed in the New Testament we refer to as elders and deacons. As we try to understand how the leaders within this structure operate together, I believe a word picture brings clarity. Visualize the church as a group heading out on a journey. The elders decide where the church is going and cast the vision. The staff drives the bus that carries us all to the destination. And the deacons make sure we have enough gas to get to where we are going.

Today, we are building upon the roles and responsibilities of these leading servants revealed in Acts 6 by examining the requirements Paul lays out for deacons in 1 Timothy 3.

Read 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

Inquiry: First Timothy along with 2 Timothy and Titus are commonly referred to as the “pastoral epistles” because they are addressed to pastors of churches and outline their pastoral duties. Basically, their responsibilities were twofold: to defend sound doctrine and maintain sound discipline. A lapse in those two main areas is how a church most often gets itself in trouble. Unfortunately, history is replete with examples of churches moving away from sound doctrine and discipline.

Timothy was the pastor of the church in Ephesus. Paul had appointed him to the position (1 Tim 1:3). As the pastor in Ephesus, Timothy faced a giant challenge. In the mid 60s AD, the city of Ephesus was large, diverse, religiously complex, and flourishing commercially, not unlike a major metropolitan area in the US today. Ephesus was the site of the temple of Artemis (Diana in Roman mythology), the patroness of sexual instinct. The cult that followed and worshiped Artemis was very influential in the Imperial city. It affected commercial activity and seems to have engulfed a number of other cult practices such as the practice of magic, sorcery, and soothsaying. I believe it is easy to see that Timothy was not ministering in a culture founded on Judeo-Christian values. This was the battle that Timothy faced outside of the church. If that was not enough, there was a battle going on within the church.

The church was dealing with the cancer of false teaching. Paul mentioned Hymenaeus and Alexander as two individuals who had to be excommunicated for rejecting “*faith and a good conscience*” (1 Tim 1:19-20). Two of the leaders, perhaps even elders, had to be handed over to Satan in order to be taught not to blaspheme. Paul does not clearly spell out exactly what they were teaching, but he did give some clues throughout the letter.

- They were straying in their doctrine (1:3).
- They were preoccupied with myths, genealogies, and speculations (1:4).
- They misused the law (1:7).
- They were apparently immoral (1:19-20).
- Their consciences were seared (4:2).
- They were forbidding marriage and certain foods (4:3).
- They craved controversy and quarrels (6:4).
- They were using godliness for material gain (6:5).

I think we can safely say that the church in Ephesus was being influenced by Gnosticism, a heresy that basically taught Jesus + the Law = salvation. Therefore, the church was not merely dealing with preferences over the style of music – they were contending “*for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3). The gospel itself was at stake.

As a way to encourage and build up Timothy and the church, Paul wrote this amazing letter. In it he instructs Timothy in sound doctrine and sound discipline. Part of that discipline involved how the church leadership should be structured and who is qualified to hold those offices.

We have identified two roles of deacons within the church. First, they are shock absorbers, muffling the shockwaves that threaten the unity of the church. They do this by loving solutions more than drama and rising to respond to the needs of the church. Second, they are problem solvers. They use wisdom to come up with solutions that meet the needs and foster unity in the church.

From these two roles, we have highlighted three primary responsibilities of deacons. First, they spot and satisfy tangible needs. Second, they protect and promote church unity. And third, they serve and support the ministry of the elders. When deacons function in this way, according to Acts 6:7, the Word of God multiplies and the gospel advances.

As important as it is for the church to be structured properly, it is equally essential for the church to select the right person. For this reason, Paul lays out the requirements necessary to hold the office of deacon. What are they? We see four categories.

1. Dignified

Like with the elders, Paul stresses character for those who desire to be deacons. The list in 3:8-13 is very similar to the list for elders in 3:1-7. Basically, the only difference is that the ability to teach and preach is not a qualification for deacons. Deacons are, quite simply, intended to exemplify the character of Christ. They are to be dignified or worthy of respect (σεμνός). Similar to the elders, they are to display an exemplary degree of Christlikeness, free from conspicuous sin. A deacon is to be respectable, righteous, and holy. This characteristic speaks of humility, on-going repentance, and a model for others to follow.

Paul further clarifies what dignity looks like in a deacon's life:

- Not double-tongued (vs. 8)
A deacon speaks the truth and the same thing to all parties.
- Not addicted to much wine (vs. 8)
Paul warned against the loss of self-control with the use of alcohol. Drunkenness destroys lives and sucks people further into sin. The Bible does not require deacons to abstain from alcohol, but they must possess the capacity for self-denial.
- Not greedy for dishonest gain (vs. 8)
Deacons are not to be consumed with the pursuit of money and material possessions. There is great danger in that pursuit. The deacon who lives to make money will have difficulty investing time and energy into caring for the congregation. The love of money also opens the door for corruption and deception. Sometimes greedy deacons manipulate churches with their donations. They may control church budgets and steer funds toward their pet ministries. They assess the success of the church by the treasury report.
- Not slanderers (vs. 11)
Deacons are not to participate in or perpetuate gossip within the church. They are shock absorbers, not reverberators. They should speak well of others and give people the benefit-of-the-doubt.
- Sober-minded (vs. 11)

Paul's profile for elders calls for them to be self-controlled, sober-minded, temperate, and disciplined. The same is true of deacons. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:23) and a mark of the Christian life. In other words, a Spirit-filled believer is a self-controlled believer.

- Faithful in all things (vs. 11)
The life of a deacon should be above approach. This person is not sinless but exemplifies Christlike character in every facet of life. There are no grounds for accusation. Commitments are fulfilled.

2. Holds the Mystery of the Faith with a Clear Conscience

Reading through the task given to the seven in Acts 6 might lead one to understand deacon ministry as that which is only practical or physical in nature. With that understanding, doctrine would then seem to be irrelevant for deacons. Verse 9 in our passage makes clear that deacon ministry also involves doctrine. While the primary responsibility of teaching falls on the elders, the deacons are not exempt from knowing their Bibles. Like all believers, they must understand the Word of God and live it out.

The term "*mystery*" (μυστήριον) does not refer to a literary genre. He is referring to divine truth that was once hidden and is now revealed. He is referring to the content of the gospel and Christian doctrine. Deacons should:

- Know the Word.
Knowing the Word necessitates reading the Word. There ought to be a hunger and desire to learn the things of God.
- Hold the Word.
Whatever truth a deacon grasps with the mind must be clung to by the heart. Deacons must not be embarrassed by the Word of God when it clashes with cultural beliefs. Instead, they should hold and stand on it without shame.
- Live the Word.
It is not enough to know what is true, a deacon's conscience must be clear. This refers back to the previous qualifications. A deacon with a clear conscience will be a person of moral integrity and courage. The one who really believes the Word is the one who lives it out.

3. Tested and Proven

I love to be around people who are new to the faith. They possess an excitement and enthusiasm that is refreshing. It is amazing to watch the immediate transformation in their lives as they recognize sin in their lives and put it to death. And because they are overwhelmed by God's grace they cannot help but tell others about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

We must not, however, mistake their enthusiasm and passion for spiritual maturity. Paul warns against appointing a new believer to the position of elder or deacon. The danger of doing so is that the new believer may become a victim of conceit that comes with this important new position. The term "elder" implies wisdom and experience, things a new believer lacks.

According to verse 10, deacons should have a track record of faithful living. They should have walked through the valleys of life and come out faithful on the other side. Deacon ministry is difficult. It contains many pressures and hardships. If the deacon has not been tested and proven faithful, then it is likely the individual might quit or take ministerial shortcuts.

4. Faithful Family Life

Paul's final requirement is that a deacon's godliness begin within the closest of relationships. He prioritizes fidelity in marriage. Male deacons are to be a one-woman kind of man. He must love his wife and be completely faithful to her. He must selflessly serve her. The home is the ultimate training ground for serving the members of the church. Verse 12 makes it clear that there is no such thing as a good deacon who is a lousy husband or father.

Paul has one last thing to say about deacons in this passage. In verse 13, he emphasizes two gifts of faithful deacon ministry. He fully understands that deaconing is not for the faint of heart. Much of it is thankless. It is largely ministry done behind the scenes. It is not on the platform for all to see. So, what keeps deacons going amid exhaustion and discouragement? Two gifts are promised:

1) Respect

Those "*who serve well gain a good standing for themselves.*" This is a horizontal gift. The church respects their ministry and honors them as godly servants and examples.

As a church we ought to honor those who serve the body. We should show them respect and appreciation.

2) Boldness

This is a vertical gift that comes from God. The deacon who serves well grows in confidence. This happens because the deacon has witnessed the gospel transform lives, salvage marriages, lead strangers to meet the needs of others, and unify people in love. As a result, the deacon becomes more confident that the Lord can and will move in the most precarious of situations.

Conclusion: Is this not what happened in the opening story? Deacon Jeff stepped into a church situation that was fractured. There was hurt and distrust on both sides. Jeff, however, because he had served the Lord and the church well for years was able to both believe God for the healing and possess the respect necessary to lead the two parties toward the healing.

Deacons are God's gift to the church. They are shock absorbers and problem solvers. The fact they are so vital to a church's health means that not just anyone can hold the office. They must be dignified, hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, be tested and proven, and demonstrate a faithful family life.

Diaconal work is not reserved only for the deacons. In a general sense, it is the calling of every Christ-follower. Peter says, "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace*" (1 Pet 4:10). May we all use the gifts the Lord has given us to serve one another in the church. Use them to serve the Lord through the worship ministry, singing and playing instruments. Use them on our tech team. Use your gifts to make our church more hospital to guests by serving on our hospitality team. Allow God to use you through the teaching ministry in adults, students, or children. There are numerous ways to put your gifts to use at Red Lane. Are you serving? Where are you serving?

This passage ends with the number of disciples increasing. People were hearing the gospel, recognizing their sinfulness, and turning to Jesus in repentance and faith. There is a good chance that some here today need to do the same.

Good news: God loves you. He created you and desires to know you.

Bad news: You are a sinner in rebellion against your Creator.

Best news: God has done everything necessary to justly deal with your sin and bring forgiveness and restoration to your life. Today, He calls you to turn from your sin and self and turn to Him as Savior and Lord. Have you received forgiveness in Christ?