

The Office of Deacon

A Necessary Service

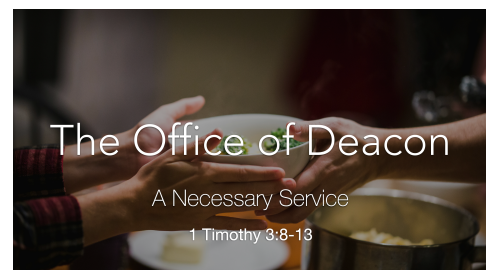
Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Sermon Series: *Timothy's Charge*

Topic: Deacons, Service

I. Introduction

In Paul's letter to Timothy, he has on his mind how God's church should be ordered and structured (2:8; 3:15). Last week he laid out the qualifications of the office of overseer (a.k.a elder/pastor), now Paul lays out the qualifications of the office of deacon. The office of overseer is a noble task while the office of deacon is a necessary service for the church of the living God.



Review

Chapter 2 begins Paul's charge to Timothy concerning the church. The church is to first prioritize prayer (2:1-15) and then the appointment of qualified officers (3:1-13). Paul lists two church offices; the office of overseer and of deacon.

- I. A Sweet Salutation
- II. The Urgent charge to Timothy (1:3-20)
- III. The Urgent Charge to the Church (2:1-4:5)
 - A. Prioritize prayer (2:1-15)
 - B. Appoint godly church officers (3:1-15)
 - 1. The Office of Overseer (3:1-7)
 - 2. **The Office of Deacon** (3:8-13)
 - C. Behavior and Truth in the Church of God (3:14-16)
- IV. Additional charge to Timothy

We looked at overseers last Sunday as Paul described the kind of person who can serve in this role (3:1-7). Overseers (a.k.a. elders/pastors) are those who are responsible for the governance, leadership, doctrine, teaching, and spiritual care of the congregation.

Overview

Today we turn to the kind of person who may serve in the office of deacon (3:8-13). We will consider five questions.

1. What does the word deacon mean?
2. What do deacons do?
3. Can women serve as deacon?
4. What are the qualifications of deacon?
5. What are the blessings of serving as deacon?

The Office of Deacon

Paul teaches that there are only two offices in the church. We see this clearly here in 1 Timothy 3 where Paul specifically lists the character qualities required for both the office overseer and the office of deacon. We also see these same two offices mentioned in the introduction of his letter to the church at Philippi.

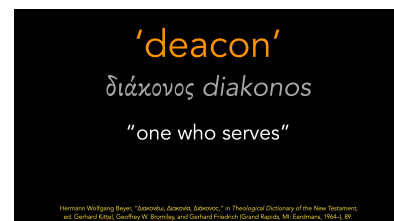
¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the **overseers** and **deacons**:
Philippians 1:1 (ESV)

These two offices are the backbone of the Christian church organizational structure. We use the word 'office' in relation to these two words when "they refer to a person occupying a recognized position in the church."¹ The office derives from, "Members of the community who are called deacons in virtue of their regular activity" of service in the church.²

1. What Does Deacon Mean?

Beginning with a definition will be helpful. The word deacon (διάκονος *diakonos*) means, "one who serves"³ in various ways.

The word is translated as servant or as minister and is used generally of many servants of God.



- "...*Christ has become servant of the Jews...*" (Rom 15:8),
- "*our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae*" (Rom 16:1),
- both Paul and Apollos are "*servants of the Lord*" (1 Cor 3:5),
- the devil's "*servants masquerade as servants of righteousness*" (2 Cor 11:15),
- Epaphras was a "*faithful minister of Christ*" (Col 1:7), and
- "*Tychicus ... is a beloved brother and faithful minister...*" (Col 4:7).

"In secular Greek διαχονέω, which is first found in Herodotus (ca.484-425 B.C.) ... means a. 'to wait at table,' b. 'to provide care for,' and... has the comprehensive meaning 'to serve.'"⁴

¹ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018), 206.

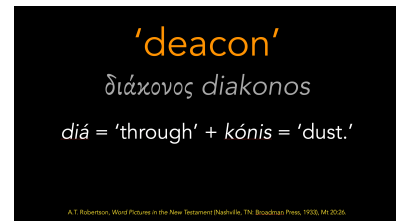
² Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "Διακονέω, Διακονία, Διάκονος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 89.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 540.

⁴ Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, "Διακονέω, Διακονία, Διάκονος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-), 82.

The Etymology of the Word

The etymology of the word appears to be the result of compounding the Greek preposition *diá*, which means 'through,' and the word *kónis*, which means 'dust,' meaning, "to raise a dust by one's hurry"⁵ or "'to kick up dust' as one running an errand."⁶ Thus, the word draws to mind the image of "dust being raised by servants who are hard at work."⁷



I saw an example of this past Thursday. I pulled into a parking spot and one of our deacons was cleaning the grills getting them ready for today. As he was scrubbing the grate, the sun was behind him, I could see a small cloud of dust rising up from his work.

"The oldest and most common meaning is 'to wait at table' and then more generally any type of service."⁸ As the church, grew and expanded, this word was applied in a technical sense to particular people set apart for specific "service within the Christian community."⁹

2. What Do Deacons Do?

What kind of service did deacons render? What exactly did deacons do? There is no specific job description laid out for deacon in Scripture, however, just as in the case of overseers so it is in the case of deacons, *the character of the person is more important than the duty of the office*. We get hints at what deacons do by looking the requirements of who such persons are to be. As is always the case with Christ, the desires of the heart are more significant than the duties of the hands. We do have clues in Scripture as to what deacons did.

In the NT the verb 'to deacon' (lit. "to serve") first appears on the lips of Jesus where he tells a parable of the Unworthy Servants and here the word is used in reference of a servant waiting on the table of his master by "serving" him food and drink. (Lk 17:8).

We find this verb again in Acts 6 when the early church was suffering from growing pains. The Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food by the Jewish Christians and so complaints came to the apostles. They prayed about this and determined that they should "*not give up preaching the word of God to διακονέω (diakoneō) tables*" (Acts 6:2). Therefore, seven men were chosen to do this "duty,"¹⁰

⁵ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 20:26.

⁶ Source: <https://biblehub.com/greek/1249.htm>.

⁷ Gregg Allison and Ryan Walsh, *Raising the Dust: How to Equip Deacons to Serve the Church* (Louisville, KY: Sojourn Network Press, 2019), 6.

⁸ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 198.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Acts 6:3.

which allowed the apostles to “*devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (Acts 6:4).

Throughout the history of the church and the formulation of church government, this chapter—Acts 6—has served as prototypical guide for understanding the duties and identity of the office of deacon.¹¹ From Acts 6 we can deduce at least three obvious duties of deacons.

Three Duties of Deacons

1. *Serving practical needs of the church.* These seven chosen men took care to served the needy widows in the church. As we consider the qualifications of deacons we will see some other practical needs that deacons may serve.
2. *Assisting overseers/elders so that they can keep primary focus on prayer and preaching.* This could be any number of particular needs, but one of the goals of these seven was to do such necessary work in the church that freed the elders/overseer/pastors to prioritize prayer and preaching and teaching.
3. *Safeguarding the church against division.* The Greek widows were feeling neglected by Jews. If this problem was not addressed, then it would have resulted in a painful tear in the fabric of the Christian community. Thus seven were chosen to prevent division.

3. Can Women Serve as Deacon?

This question arises from v.11. Who are these women that are mentioned? Are they wives of deacons? Are they women deacons?

You’ll notice that Paul begins writing, “*Deacons likewise...*” then he lists seven qualities of deacon then he uses the word ‘*likewise*’ a second time. This word “is used in introducing a second or third in a series.”¹²

This clues us in to the fact that Paul is changing focus, but staying on the same topic. The topic is church organization. He uses ‘*likewise*’ in v.8 to show that he has moved from overseer to deacon. He has transitioned from one office to another. His repetition of the word, in v.11, functions in the same way. Paul is still talking about the topic of deacons, but he now has in mind a subgroup within the office of deacon. The question is about whom is he speaking? It is the wives of deacons or the women who serve as deacons?

According to the ESV translation, v.11 begins, “*Their wives likewise...*” The word translated as ‘wives’ is the word γυνή (gynē, here plural gynaikas), which is the usual word for ‘woman’ and

¹¹ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, ed. D. A. Carson, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018), 204.

¹² Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies from the Greek New Testament: For the English Reader*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 61.

can be translated either as either 'wife' or 'woman' depending upon the context. You'll notice a footnote in the ESV which states that this could be translated as either "*Wives likewise*" or "*Women likewise*." The translators of the ESV have made a judgment call, because the context is indefinite.

Seven Reasons Why Women Can Serve as Deacon

There are seven reasons why it is probably best to translate this word as 'women' rather than 'wives' and thus, seven reasons why women may serve as deacon.

1. "*Likewise women*" flows more naturally as a coherent train of thought as Paul remains on the topic of deacon, and states, "women likewise" who serve as deacons. Why would wives of deacons have a special list of qualifications while the wives of elders receive none?
2. *The absence of "their."* If Paul were talking about the wives of deacons then he could have easily written, "their wives," but he did not. Though the word 'their' is present in the ESV translation, the word does not appear in the original Greek. This fact is noted by a footnote in the ESV. Why? Most likely because he was not talking about wives of deacons, but about women deacons.
3. *Paul's usual use of the word gynē.* Paul uses *gynaikas* five¹³ other times in 1 Timothy outside the context of this passage and in each of those instances the word is translated 'women' rather than 'wives.' Thus, it makes most sense to be consistent and translate it the same way here in v.11.
4. *Pauls' movement from general to specific.* In vs.8-10 Paul lists general qualities of deacons which could apply to either men or women. Then in v.11 he specifically addresses women, in v.12 he specifically addresses men, and he concludes with v.13 which applies to both men and women.
5. *There is parallel between the qualifications of men (v.8) and women (v.11).* 'Dignified' in v.8 is parallel with 'dignified' in v.11, 'not double-tongued' is parallel to 'not a slanderer' in v.11, 'not addicted to much wine' parallels 'sober-minded' in v.11, and 'not greedy for dishonest gain' parallels 'faithful in all things' in v.11. Essentially the qualifications for both men and women align.
6. *Paul use of the word 'deacon' regarding Phoebe.* He uses the word 'deacon' in his letter to the Romans regarding a lady named Phoebe. "*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant (diakonos) of the church at Cenchreae...*" (Rom 16:1). Some

⁸ 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.

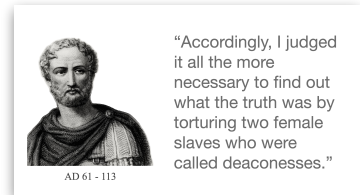
1 Timothy 3:8-11 (ESV)

¹³ 1 Timothy 2:9, 10, 11, 12, 14.

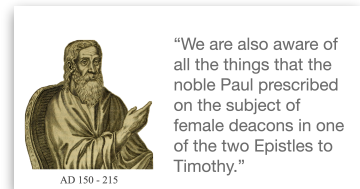
argue that Paul is using the word in the general sense of “service” to the church. It is true that Paul uses the word to refer to general service of the gospel and the church, but whenever he does so he never specifically ties it to a specific church. Here he does. Phoebe is not merely a “servant of the church” in general. Rather she is “a deacon of the church at Cenchreae.” This specific language most likely means that Phoebe was a deacon in that church.

7. **Early evidence that women did serve as deacons.** There is historical evidence that the early church included women serving as deacons.

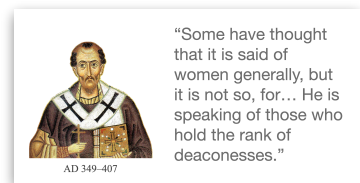
1. Pliny the Younger (AD 61-113), Governor of Bithynia, in about AD 112 wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan stating, “Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses.”¹⁴



2. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150–215), one of the early church fathers wrote, “We are also aware of all the things that the noble Paul prescribed on the subject of female deacons in one of the two Epistles to Timothy.”¹⁵



3. John Chrysostom (AD 349–407): “Some have thought that [1 Tim. 3:11] is said of women generally, but it is not so, for... He is speaking of those who hold the rank of deaconesses.”¹⁶



Given the preponderance of this evidence, we conclude that women are permitted to serve as deacon.

4. What Are the Qualifications of Deacon?

As we consider the list of qualities necessary to serve as deacon, you will notice that neither teaching nor governing the church makes the list. Since these are the two things that Paul lists among the qualifications of the office of overseer, which is limited to qualified men only, then women who serve as deacon would not be in violation of that command.

¹⁴ Matt Smethurst. *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), Apple Books, Appendix 1.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

1. **Dignified (v.8,11).** Some of you translations may have “worthy of respect.” The word carries the meaning of “gravity; weightiness;” it means one who is serious and not a crazy clown. A deacon knows how to be well mannered and not unnecessarily offensive or silly when the situation calls for sobriety.
2. **Not double-tongued (v.8, not slanderer v.11).** This means the tongue is under control. The deacon is not a gossip, a slanderer, a talebearer, a flatterer. A deacon must be sincere and does not say one thing to one person and another thing to someone else. A deacon never says anything untrue about someone with the intention of harming that person’s character or reputation. He’s not dishonest or hypocritical. The deacon must rule the tongue, rather than being ruled by the tongue.
3. **Not addicted to much wine (v.8).** A deacon must not be given to much drinking. A person who has a tendency to drink too much, ought not to be a deacon. The godly deacon must be able to control the appetites and desires and say no when it is appropriate. The qualified deacon cannot be a habitual drinker.
4. **Not greedy for dishonest gain (v.8).** A deacon must have his financial desires under control. Since deacons may take care of the material needs of people, he or she must not be greedy and must be trustworthy in financial dealings. The love of money must be under control. Greed has no place in the life of a deacon (or any Christian).
5. **Hold mystery of faith with a clear conscience (v.9).** In the NT the mystery of the faith referred to salvation being centered upon Jesus who is the Savior of both Jews and Gentiles. In general this probably means not having any doubts about truth of the gospel and the ability of Jesus to save all who come to him. This assumes that a deacon knows the Bible well. A deacon must a diligent student of the Bible and understand and explain the gospel of Jesus.
6. **Tested and found blameless (v.10).** ‘Blameless’ points to being above reproach. The conduct of deacons should be observed and there should be nothing in their conduct that would bring shame upon the name of Christ. All deacons should serve the church in some smaller, observable ministry so that the church can see if they are found faithful. He who is faithful in small areas of responsibility, will also be faithful in larger areas of responsibility.
7. **Sober-minded (v.11).** The deacon is to be serious minded and thoughtful, not flippant and unable to give due consideration to the weighty matters that such an office will most certainly have to confront. It also “denotes self-control, balanced judgment, and freedom from debilitating excesses or rash behavior.”¹⁷
8. **Faithful in all things (v.11).** A similar standard to being “above reproach” (3:2). A deacon is one marked by a consistent, faithful lifestyle, both in word and deed in every area of life. A deacon must be faithful and trustworthy. He must keep his word and not make promises he

¹⁷ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995), Apple Books, chapter 9.

can't keep. When he commits to anything he must fulfill his commitment and see it through to the end.

9. **Husband of one wife (v.12).** The faithfulness extends to the married life. Paul is now speaking directly to men. At minimum this phase prohibits a polygamist from being a deacon. The construction of the grammar places the word 'wife/woman' in the place of emphasis. Thus, this phrase could be translated a "one woman man." A deacon must have his sexuality submitted to Jesus in every way. He must have control over his sexual desires.

Must a deacon be married? Some assume this. However, if this were true neither Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, nor even Jesus would qualify to be a deacon. This cannot be the case, for how can it make sense that Paul whom Christ Jesus qualified to expound the qualifications of elder and deacon would himself not be qualified to hold the very office about which he authoritatively speaks and over which he exercises apostolic authority?

Furthermore, Paul would be contradicting himself since elsewhere extolls the value of singleness in being able to pour one's life whole-heartedly into ministry, even going so far as to say,

"I wish all were as I myself am. It is good to remain single as I am"
1 Corinthians 7:7-8

"The unmarried man concerns himself with the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. While the married man concerns himself about worldly things, how to please his wife and his interests are divided." But he who remains single has... "undivided devotion to the Lord."
1 Corinthians 7:32-35

If Paul had intended to communicate that a deacon must be a married," then he could have easily said that in the Greek. However, he does not use the Greek word for marriage.¹⁸ He simply says, that a deacon must be a "one woman man." The simplest meaning is if a deacon, if married, must be faithfully devoted to his spouse alone and not be flirtations or given to lust. A deacon must be relationally and sexually pure and faithful, being guilty of neither polygamy, adultery, nor any kind of sexual immorality.

10. **Manages household well.** Finally, a deacon must be one who has a well managed household. How the household operates needs to be taken into consideration when deliberating these qualifications in regard to a man who is married. How he handles his home is a window into how he would handle Christ's church.

¹⁸ For the construction of such a sentence in Greek, see Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 917.

5. What Are the Blessings of Serving as a Deacon?

Paul lists two blessings for those who serve as deacon of Christ's church.

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.

1 Timothy 3:13 (ESV)

"Good standing for themselves" means that these servants will grow to become well respected by the church. As people observe the good and faithful conduct of these servants, the people hold them in high regard. This means that serving among Christians is not to be demeaned, but exalted. Christian do not look down on those who serve them, but rather they see in them a reflection of our Lord Jesus who knelt before his disciples and washed their feet and said to them, *"He who would be great among you, must be servant of all."*¹⁹

"Great confidence in the faith" comes from great service among God's people. The point seems to be that as one serves the church, one's confidence in faith increases. The more a deacon serves God's people, the more his faith in Jesus grows, which gives him *greater confidence in Jesus* and less in himself. The service of the deacon builds up the faith of the deacon. Thus, not only do deacons grow to earn the respect of the church, but they also grow in their own faith in Jesus. These are two blessings that will come to those who serve in the office of deacon.

III. Conclusion

The office of deacon is a role that provides service to Christ's church, in various ways. Deacons serve practical needs of people in the church, they assist the elders/overseers so that they can prioritize prayer and preaching, and they guard the church against division. Since the office of deacon does not entail any teaching or governing responsibilities in the church, women are permitted to serve as deacon. Just as we saw in the case of overseer/elder/pastor so we see in regards to deacon, the character of the heart is more important than the skill of the hands. Who the person truly is inwardly is far more important than what he or she does outwardly. Every Christian should consider these qualifications and strive to live up to them. For God's blesses those who truly embrace these qualities and so also will his church be blessed who is served by such people.

To Christ be the glory. Amen.

¹⁹ Mark 10:43-44; cf. 9:35.

IV. Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Paul places the qualifications for deacons immediately after the qualifications for overseers? What does this teach us about the importance of both offices in the life of the church?
2. The word deacon means "servant." How does Jesus' example of servant leadership shape our understanding of ministry in the church? In what ways does our culture view service differently than Scripture?
3. Acts 6 suggests that deacons help meet practical needs, support elders, and protect church unity. Which of these responsibilities do you think is most often overlooked today, and why?
4. Paul focuses far more on character than on skills or abilities when describing deacons. Why is character more important than competence in church leadership? Which qualification stands out to you most personally?
5. The sermon argued that women may serve as deacons based on 1 Timothy 3:11 and other biblical evidence. What reasons from the sermon did you find most persuasive or least persuasive? How should Christians discuss such questions with humility and charity?
6. Several qualifications involve self-control—especially regarding speech, money, and personal appetites. Why are these areas so critical for those who serve the church? Which of these areas tends to be the greatest challenge for believers today?
7. Paul says a deacon must "hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (v. 9). What does it mean to hold firmly to the gospel? How can service and sound doctrine work together rather than compete with one another?
8. The qualification "tested first" (v. 10) suggests that leadership should follow proven faithfulness. Why is patience important when recognizing leaders in the church? What kinds of opportunities help reveal whether someone is ready for greater responsibility?
9. Verse 13 promises that faithful deacons gain both a good standing and greater confidence in the faith. Why do you think serving others often strengthens our own faith in Christ? Have you ever experienced spiritual growth through serving others?
10. The sermon concluded that every Christian should strive for these qualities, not just deacons. Which qualification would you most like to grow in this year, and what practical steps could help you pursue that growth?
11. After studying this passage, how can our church better cultivate a culture where service is valued, encouraged, and modeled after Christ Himself?

