

# 1 Timothy – The Household of God

*This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18 ESV)*

*I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> 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 the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15 ESV)*

## **Deacons**

**January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022**

**1 Timothy 3:8-13**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning!

Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 3. In our passage for this morning, the Apostle Paul outlines the qualifications for deacons. That means that, for the second Sunday in a row now, we are going to spend our morning studying the qualifications for an office in the church. In case you feel the temptation to tune out before we even begin, I want you to consider this lament from Jerome, one of the church fathers from the fourth century. He wrote:

Many build churches nowadays; their walls and pillars of glowing marble, their ceilings glittering with gold, their altars studded with jewels. Yet to the choice of Christ's ministers no heed is paid.<sup>1</sup>

It can be fun to focus on externals! Big buildings, new chairs and expansion opportunities excite us! But we're reminded in 1 Timothy that if the leaders of the church begin to look more like the world than they do like the Saviour, then there is no building, savings account or budget that will stop the freefall. God's word has very little to say about the building we gather in, but He is *very specific* about the kinds of people that we set apart for service. So, let's lean in.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome as quoted by Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision For The Deacons – Assisting The Elders With The Care Of God's Church*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2017), 87.

Last week we studied the qualifications for the elders of the church – the men who are called to teach and to exercise authority. Today, Paul has set before us the qualifications for the deacons – those whose ministry it is to serve. We find these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 verses 8-13. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Unfortunately, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding the deaconate and there is also a great deal of baggage that many of us bring with us into this discussion. Many of us grew up in churches without deacons. Others grew up in churches where deacons essentially functioned as elders. It will be hard to land together if we’re all starting with different assumptions. For that reason, I think we would be well served to devote the first half of our time this morning to a bird’s eye view of the New Testament teaching on deacons. Having done that, we’ll be better equipped in the second half of our time to lean in and to consider the qualifications listed here in our passage. First, let’s look at this text and others like it from a bird’s eye view and ask the question:

## What Are Deacons?

In the New Testament, there are two passages that explicitly refer to deacons, one passage that *anticipates* the office, and one passage that is debated<sup>2</sup>. The two uncontested passages are 1 Timothy 3 – which we are studying this morning – and Philippians 1:1 where Paul writes:

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

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Smethhurst describes the four passages this way in Pastors Talk – A Podcast By IX 9Marks. *On Deacons (with Matt Smethurst)*. Posted April 13, 2021. Accessed January 17, 2022.

The first obvious but never-the-less important observation we need to make about deacons is that:

## 1. **Deacons are not elders**

Look again at that passage in Philippians. “The overseers AND deacons.” Look at the qualifications here in 1 Timothy 3. There are qualifications for elders/overseers, AND there are qualifications for deacons. The AND teaches us clearly that elders and deacons are not the same.

That might seem like an odd thing to specify, but one of the underlying tensions surrounding this discussion is that a significant number of churches have treated their deacons as if they were elders. This led to deacons overseeing the finances, deacons teaching the doctrine, and deacons competing with the elder board. When we forget the AND – when we merge these two offices together – we invite confusion, and we get ourselves into trouble.

The most significant difference between the two offices is that the deacons are nowhere required to be able to teach. Teaching and exercising authority is the responsibility of the elders – not the deacons. That distinction is important.

So, if the deacons are not elders – if it is not their responsibility to teach and exercise authority – then what are they?

## 2. **Deacons are servants**

The Greek word for deacon derives from the word for servant. It is defined as:

one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier*  
one who gets something done, at the behest of a superior, *assistant*<sup>3</sup>

So, contrary to popular practice, the deacons were never intended to be a governing board that competes with the elders. The deacons were always intended to be *servants* who operated at the direction and discretion of the elders to meet the tangible needs in the church and in the community.

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<sup>3</sup> BDAG, s.v. “διάκονος,” 230.

I mentioned earlier that deacons are referred to *explicitly* in two passages – 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1, but I want to look now to a passage which *anticipated* the office. We find that in Acts 6:1-6. Let me read that for you and then we'll make a few observations.

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. <sup>2</sup> 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.”** <sup>3</sup> 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.”** <sup>5</sup> 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 Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6 ESV)

Here, we find an *anticipation* of the diaconate. Some have argued that the seven in Jerusalem were the first deacons, but the text never refers to them as deacons. This is a passage about how the twelve APOSTLES appointed seven men – who are not referred to as deacons – to assist them with the tangible needs in Jerusalem. So, we should be careful not to draw a one-to-one correspondence between this passage and our passage for this morning.

Nevertheless, what we can say with certainty is that there is a *pattern* put forward in this scene that certainly carries over into the formal institution of the office of the deacon. The pattern is this: If those who are called to serve the Word are forced to neglect that responsibility in order to serve tables, the whole church suffers.

That's the pattern that we see carried forward into the offices of elders and deacons. Elders are called to teach and to exercise authority over the church, and deacons are called to serve the tangible, physical needs in the congregation and community.

This, by the way, is why there are many churches in the New Testament that have no deacons, but there are no churches in the New Testament that have no elders. A church cannot exist without the preaching and teaching of the word. A church needs elders. However, if a church is small enough and manageable enough, a church can conceivably exist without deacons. For example, if you read

through Paul's letter to Titus, you'll find that he did not instate deacons in Crete. Why is that? It's likely because the church in Crete was still young and small and they didn't yet *need* deacons.

So, deacons are not elders – they are servants. That's important to bear in mind as we come to our next point which has been an area of disagreement within wider evangelicalism. We believe that:

### 3. **Deacons can be men or women**

Once again, I told you that two passages speak explicitly to this office – 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1, and that one passage anticipates the office – Acts 6. But there is one last text that refers to a deacon, however there is not widespread agreement on how it should be understood. In Romans 16, Paul writes:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, **a deacon of the church in Cenchreae**. (Romans 16:1 NIV)

If you look up that passage in the ESV, you will see that the word “deacon” is translated instead as “servant.” This is because good Christians disagree as to whether or not both men and women can serve in the office of deacon. This discussion is not unimportant, because it will determine our understanding of the passage in front of us this morning. In verse 11, for example, we read:

**Their wives** likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. (1 Timothy 3:11 ESV)

In Greek, the word used for “wife” is the same word that is used for “woman.” So, for example, if you read this same verse in the NIV, it reads:

In the same way, **the women** are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. (1 Timothy 3:11 NIV)

So, what are we to make of this? Is the deaconate reserved for men, and is verse 11 a reference to the qualifications of their wives? Or is it a reference to the women who served as deacons in the church – women like Phoebe – with a note on some qualifications specific to their character?

If we think back to Paul's instructions for women in the church in verses 11-15 of chapter 2, the ONLY restriction that Paul put on women was that they were not to teach and exercise authority in the church. Those are the responsibilities of the eldership, therefore, Paul set apart that office for men. However, the qualifications for the deaconate say nothing about teaching or governing. So, why then would we prohibit women from serving in this office if we have no passage commanding us to do so?

The evidence that we have from the early church demonstrates that they recognized female deacons. For example, around 130 A.D. Christianity was facing heavy persecution. Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, normally executed Christians if they refused to renounce the faith, but evidently, he would sometimes torture believers to learn more about their growing movement. He describes one such episode:

I thought it therefore necessary to try and find the truth of the matter by torture as well, (and that) from two female slaves **who were called Deaconesses**.<sup>4</sup>

If Phoebe was referred to as a deacon, and if the earliest church recognized female deacons, and if Paul listed qualifications for women, and if there is nothing within the office of the deacon that is off limits for women, then I see no reason why we should impose a restriction on this office.

Finally:

#### **4. Deacons are worthy of great respect**

With all this talk about how the deacons don't teach, and how they are not elders, and with the emphasis on service, one might be tempted to think that to be a deacon is to be *less than* an elder. But that could not be further from the truth! Deacons, elders, evangelists, Sunday school teachers, hospital-bound seniors and home-bound mothers all possess equal dignity and worth in God's kingdom. We play different roles, and we have different responsibilities, but as we see two weeks ago in 1 Corinthians 12, we are all irreplaceable in the body of Christ. In fact:

On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable (1 Corinthians 12:22 ESV)

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<sup>4</sup> As quoted by William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 210.

To be a deacon is to be a servant – but in God’s kingdom, to be a servant is to be GREAT! Jesus said that! Jesus MODELLED that! In Mark 10:45 we read:

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45 ESV)

In God’s kingdom, the first will be the last, and the last will be first. Therefore, in the same way we were reminded last week that it is a noble thing to aspire to the office of elder, here we read:

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)

It is a noble thing to serve well as a deacon. Those who do so will gain a good standing for themselves, but also – and this is incredible – they will gain a *great confidence in the faith*. What does that mean? After all, I’m saved by grace – not by service. So, why would my service affect my confidence before the Lord? That’s a fair question. To answer it, can I point your attention to a parable that Jesus told in Matthew 25. In the final judgement, some were rewarded for housing Jesus, and for giving him a drink when he was thirsty. But they didn’t remember doing any of that! They asked, “When did we house you, or feed you, or give you a drink?” Do you remember his answer?

‘Truly, I say to you, **as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.**’ (Matthew 25:40b ESV)

To be a deacon is to devote your life to the service of “the least of these, Jesus’ brothers.” It is to make a meal for widow in need – or to coordinate a place to stay for the believer who just lost their apartment – or to distribute benevolence to people who have fallen upon financial hardship. In short, to be a deacon is to devote yourself to serving Jesus by serving his people. As you do that well, you will gain a good standing and a great confidence in the faith.

In summary:

Deacons are not elders. Deacons are servants. Deacons can be men or women. And deacons are worthy of great respect.

That being said, with the time we have left this morning, we're going to zoom in and consider the qualifications for deacons and then we'll conclude with the implications for us as a congregation.

## What Are The Qualifications For Deacons?

If you're looking nervously at your watch right now, let me put you at ease. There is a great deal of overlap between the character qualifications of an elder and the character qualifications of a deacon. Since we covered those qualifications in depth last Sunday, that will enable us to move through this list very quickly. But before we jump in, I want to make sure that you see one more thing from the bird's eye view. Look in your Bible at 1 Timothy 3. Alexander Strauch notes:

It is important for us to realize that Paul shows as much concern for the deacons' eligibility as he does for the overseers' qualifications.<sup>5</sup>

The deacons are not *less important than* the elders. They serve in a different capacity. They follow the oversight of the elders. But they are *officers* in Christ's church, therefore the appointment of deacons should be as prayerful and careful as the appointment of elders. Just because Tommy has a toolbelt doesn't mean he should be set apart as a deacon. Even though Linda can make a mean lasagna, she still must demonstrate exemplary character before being appointed. We're going to summarize this qualifications list under four headings this morning<sup>6</sup>. First:

### 1. Deacons must demonstrate self-control

As with the elders, this self-control should be evident in every aspect of their lives – from their behavior to their speech, to their habits, to their finances. We see this in verse 8:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. (1 Timothy 3:8 ESV)

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision For The Deacons – Assisting The Elders With The Care Of God's Church*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2017), 26.

<sup>6</sup> I am influenced in the division of these four summary categories by John Stott. He has titled the categories differently, but I'm following his suggested groupings. John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 100-101.



And similar qualifications are highlighted for the women in verse 11:

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers (1 Timothy 3:11a ESV)

The word “dignified” here:

describes a person whose attitudes and conduct win the admiration of others. It refers to a respectable, well-thought-of person.<sup>7</sup>

Now, of course, this should be an aspiration for *all* of us as Christians. We are *all* ambassadors of Christ, and we should *all* reflect on what our lives say about Jesus to the watching world.

But for those who are set apart in official offices of the church, the stakes are even higher. If Lucy delivers lasagnas but gossips and slanders others at work – if Tommy installs cabinets for widows but spends a few hours at the bar before coming home from work on Fridays – if the acts of service are accompanied by overt, unrepentant sin then the gospel witness is ruined!

And when we get this wrong, it does just as much damage to our witness *inside* the church as it does *outside*. How will Lucy’s friends trust a leadership team that willingly turned a blind eye to her sin? How disillusioned will Tommy’s family be if no one was willing to call dad out on his alcoholism because they need his handyman skills?

Lowering the bar is a REAL temptation in the church! It was a problem in first century Ephesus and it’s a problem in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada. Pragmatism – doing something because it works – is extremely dangerous! When needs arise and you find someone who can put out the fire, it is oh so tempting to put on the rose-colored glasses and to ignore blatant, obvious, DISQUALIFYING sin. But here, in the blueprints of a healthy church, Paul is reminding us that we cannot compromise. In behavior, speech, habits and finances, deacons must demonstrate self-control. Second:

## **2. Deacons must have a firm grasp of the faith**

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision For The Deacons – Assisting The Elders With The Care Of God’s Church*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2017), 90.

We see this in verse 9:

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (1 Timothy 3:9 ESV)

Now, what exactly is “the mystery of the faith”? One commentator notes:

In the New Testament it signifies **the secret of salvation through Jesus Christ**, which is revealed by the Holy Spirit to all who will believe. Today the word *mystery* implies knowledge withheld; in the Bible it indicates truth revealed.<sup>8</sup>

So, while deacons are not required to possess the gift of teaching – that requirement is specific to the elders – they ARE required to possess a thorough understanding of the gospel. This is important because opportunities for gospel witness often arise as you serve hurting people. Evangelism and service often go hand in hand! To go back to Lucy and her lasagnas – it’s very possible that she will deliver that lasagna to an older widow who is in need of some prayer and encouragement. Lucy needs to be equipped and ready for whatever opportunities arise.

More than a mere *understanding* of the faith, deacons need to live with *a clear conscience*. That is to say, the deacon isn’t simply required to pass the doctrine test on paper – they need to pass the doctrine test *with their life!* William Mounce describes it this way:

It is not sufficient to have a grasp on the theological profession of the church; that knowledge must be accompanied with the appropriate behavior, in this case a conscience that is clear from any stain of sin.<sup>9</sup>

The elders are called to be able to teach. The deacons are called to hold a firm understanding. But both are required to WALK THE WALK. Deacons must have a firm grasp of the faith. Third:

### **3. Deacons must be tried and tested**

We see this in verse 10:

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Earle, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Ephesians - Philemon)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 11, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 367.

<sup>9</sup> William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 200.

And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (1 Timothy 3:10 ESV)

This qualification is very similar to the qualification that elders are not to be recent converts. The emphasis here seems to be on patience. We are inclined to move too quickly. When problems arise and a potential solution presents itself, our natural tendency is to jump first and to ask questions later. But it is significantly easier to say “no” to a person who is considering a role than it is to remove a person after you’ve already placed them in a role. Once again, if we think back to the context in the Ephesian church, they knew this all too well. They had elders who had gone off the rails – and it is not unlikely that they also had deacons who had followed suit. Paul is writing here to mitigate that problem for the future and to establish a pattern of *deliberation* and *patience*.

Now, he doesn’t specify exactly what this “test” might look like. It could be that a person is identified as a candidate and then observed for a year. It could be that a person is appointed but on a probationary basis. The exact application of this principle is broad, but the need for testing is universal. As Alexander Strauch notes:

The examination and approval of elders and deacons is one of the most important decisions a congregation and its leaders make in the life of the church.<sup>10</sup>

This is an area that I would like us to improve upon in the years to come. In the appointment of elders and deacons, I want it to be said of us that we were *deliberate*, *thorough*, and *patient*. That seems to be the approach that God blesses. Deacons must be tried and tested. And finally:

#### **4. Deacons must be faithful in all things**

In verse 12, Paul says of the men:

<sup>12</sup>Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. (1 Timothy 3:12 ESV)

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision For The Deacons – Assisting The Elders With The Care Of God’s Church*, (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 2017), 111-112.

As we noted last week, this qualification is not stating that a deacon *must* be married, but it *is* saying that a married deacon is to be “one-woman man.” What Paul is calling for here is *faithfulness* and *fidelity*. In the same way that we interview potential elders and their spouses and ask the hard questions about these sensitive issues, we should apply the same process to any potential deacons. The deacons often minister to the most vulnerable in the congregation, so the greatest care must go into their selection and screening.

In the same way, the second half of this qualification isn't saying that a deacon *must have children*, but it *is* saying that a deacon with children should manage his household well. As we saw last week, if you want to discern who a person is, you need to find out who they are at home.

Likewise, he says of the women that they are to be:

sober-minded, faithful in all things. (1 Timothy 3:11b ESV)

The overarching theme in these qualifications is that the deacon must have a demonstrated track record of faithfulness in the assignment that they have already been given.

Before you jump up to take on a new responsibility in the church, how are you doing as a parent? How are you doing as a spouse? Or, if you're single, how are you doing as a mentor? Is your home in order? Have you made good decisions? Before we ask you to demonstrate faithfulness in a larger sphere, have you demonstrated faithfulness in your current sphere? This is in keeping with Jesus' parable of the talents. The servant worked diligently with the resources he had been entrusted with. Then, when he came to his master:

His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. **You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much.** Enter into the joy of your master.’ (Matthew 25:23 ESV)

That's the principle here. Before a person is set apart as a deacon – as an official servant in the church – they must demonstrate self-control, they must have a firm grasp of the faith, they must be tried and tested and they must be faithful in all things.

With these qualifications in mind, I see two implications for us as a congregation moving forward.

## Implications

First, in light of what we have seen in the text:

### **1. We need to be protective of the focus and attention of our elders**

As we observed earlier, not every New Testament church had deacons. This implies that not every New Testament church *needed* deacons. Perhaps they were small enough that the congregation was not overwhelmed by the physical needs as they arose.

However, as we saw in Acts 6, sometimes the circumstances in a church can change. If the Lighthouse were to close tomorrow, for example, then we would suddenly have a housing crisis on our hands. If the foodbank were to close, we would be scrambling to find a way to assist some needy families in our community. If some of our people were injured and lost employment, we would need to install some structure and support for them. Things can change in a hurry. Sometimes, without even realizing that it has happened, the elders can find themselves sucked into crisis management to the neglect of prayer, teaching and oversight.

Therefore, as a congregation we need to be protective of the focus and attention of our elders. We don't want them distracted with the coordination of meal trains and the organization of a member's upcoming move. We want them to be shepherding a couple through their marriage crisis and praying earnestly about the health and direction of the congregation. This isn't because physical service is beneath the elders – it is because the body functions best when every member plays its role.

And that leads to our last implication:

### **2. We need to be proactive in praying about and preparing for deacons at Redeemer**

If a deacon must be tested before being instated, then that suggests to me that a church that waits until a crisis is upon them before instituting their deacons is a church that is inviting trouble. We need to think through the process of assessing and appointing deacons. We need to identify and

train some godly men and women. We need to pray that God would raise up the right people to serve at the right time.

In the year leading up to our launch, the elders devoted a year of study to the role of deacons in the church. We decided to defer the launch of the deaconate while we got our feet under us in year one. I think that was the right decision.

However, in the very-near future, we will need to get the deacon ministry up and running. Hold us to that. And in the same way that I issued a call last Sunday inviting you to consider whether God would have you aspire to the office of elder, I want to issue the same invitation this morning regarding deacons.

Pray through these qualifications. Is this you? Is God calling you to serve His church in this way?

God's word teaches us here that a healthy church sets apart godly men and women to serve as deacons. Therefore, if we would be a healthy church moving forward, we need to act upon what we've seen here. We need qualified elders. We need qualified deacons. And we need them sooner than later.

This is His church. These are His instructions. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.