

Deacons

I Timothy 3:8-13

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. 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. (ESV)

If you were here last week you know that I'm doing a short series, only two sermons, on offices in the church. I was in Colossians, and I'm going to go back to Colossians after this week. One of the reasons I stopped to preach on both elders and deacons is because we're toward the end of our officer nominating process. Since I've been here preaching for a few years, I don't know that I've ever preached through the qualifications of elder or deacon, and I don't remember hearing sermons like that when I was a member either. So, I thought, "Maybe it's a good time to just spend at least one Sunday on elders and one Sunday on deacons."

Just to give you a little context, in the Book of I Timothy where we're looking at elders and deacons the question is, "Why did Paul have to write Timothy about the office of elder and about the office of deacon?" In our church, by the way, for nominations we also have the position of trustees, who manage the physical plant, which is just as important. But why did Paul address the offices of elders and deacons? If you read the Book of I Timothy you find out pretty quickly that it's sort of a baseline book of church order. Paul tells Timothy he writes this book to show him how the church ought to be ordered. Why did Timothy need that? Because Timothy was a young pastor and the church apparently was disorderly. First, Paul told them: "There are certain people in your church teaching strange doctrine and they're causing conflict and causing endless controversies. Tell those people to stop (period).

Second, Paul talked to him about worship. People were apparently causing problems in worship. There were questions. People disagreed about worship (I know that's a surprise, but they did). So, Paul wrote Timothy and said, "Here are some issues you need to be careful of when you're dealing with the issue of worship." Then in chapter 3 he talks about elders and deacons. The office of elder can be sort of summed up in the word "shepherd" because the elder leads and admonishes and rebukes. Today I want to take a different spin on that office in order to contrast it with the office of deacon.

Among the elders' qualifications, at least one is not found in the qualifications for deacons, and that is the ability to teach. It said, "Elders ought to be able to teach." The primary job of elders, Paul says in Titus, is to encourage sound doctrine and to admonish or rebuke false doctrine. Our own Book of Order in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church says the elder's job primarily is to represent the mind of Christ in the courts of the church. The courts of the church are the local meetings and the national meetings. The elders' job in a sense is to guard orthodoxy and to teach orthodoxy. We're going to call that the "ministry of truth." The elders' job, among other things, is primarily to be about the truth. Whether it's teaching people the truth, correcting untruth, or representing the truth to people, elders are responsible for guarding the truth and for propagating the truth. Here's the problem: if your church is only defined by the truth, your church is probably cold and lifeless and hasn't reached anybody for a long time. If you're only defined by "the truth," you can be heartless. I know people who are heartless, because all they care about, they think, is the truth. Truth without tears is really as bad as not having the truth at all at some level. What do I mean, "tears"? If you say my life or my ministry or church is all about the truth" and there are no tears you're basically ignoring one of the primary characteristics of the human condition, and that is suffering and misery and empathy. You cannot reach people unless you have both truth and tears, unless you have the ability to tell people the truth and care for people and enter into their world.

Some of you haven't been to church for a long time because every time you go to church you feel like, "All I hear is the truth. These people stand up and tell me solid doctrine, I guess, but they have no idea what my life is like. They have no idea what it's like to lose a spouse, to be divorced, like to have to raise kids." Now, we know that's not true, but that's what people often think because of the way we present ourselves. "All these people care about is the truth. They don't have a clue about what goes on in the real world." You're missing something if that's what you think, if you haven't trusted Jesus because of that.

Some of you maybe aren't Christians because you've been to church before and all you've seen is tears. You meet people, Christians, who empathize and sympathize with you but never tell you the truth. They don't really love you enough to enter in and to tell you the truth about Jesus and your sin. The answer to both the person who's seeking truth and the person who's seeking empathy and tears is found only in one place. It's the cross of Jesus. Let's say you are a self-righteous person and you want the truth, when you look at the cross what you get is the truth. You see at the cross that you're not as good as you think you are. No matter how good you are, no matter how good you think you are the cross is still necessary because you missed the mark. On the other hand, if you feel a need for someone to sympathize with you, someone who has empathy, someone who knows what it's like to be you, you look at the cross because at the cross what you see is the utmost empathy. You see Jesus there saying, "I am here because not only do I know what it feels like to be in your sin and misery, but in fact I am so empathizing with you that I am becoming your sin and misery so that you can become the righteousness of God in me." If the church wants to reach people, it needs to have both truth and tears because that's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about.

If it's important to have both truth and tears, you know that Jesus would give us offices in the church that represent both of these things. With elders you have the ministry of truth. With deacons, on the other hand, what you have is a ministry of tears, a ministry of empathy.

We have three points this morning when considering the office of deacon. The first point I'm going to call "the deacon's test." The second point (because I love receiving anonymous notes of complaint so much) I decided to call "the deacon's gender" just to be non-controversial. The third thing we're going to look at is "the deacon's reward."

Just as a side note, by the way, at some point I will also probably have to preach about the importance of church membership. When you look in the Bible about elders and things, it's always supposing you're a Christian and you're accountable to somebody. You're accountable to elders. But the other thing is that when you think about these ministries of truth and tears, you're a Christian, you're responsible for both of them. Most people do not have both of them in spades. Most of us tend either toward being the truth side or toward the empathy, tears side. You need the other people in the body to balance you out. If you're heavy on truth and you just know that's your personality, you need to be in a place where there are people who are heavy on tears who can check you in that.

Let's look first at the deacon's test. We're going to look at the qualifications as we build up to the deacon's test. Notice in verse 8 Paul says,

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 . . . (ESV)

First of all, Paul just opens up by saying, "Deacons likewise." When he says "likewise" that's a signal that he's starting a different category. "Deacon" in the New Testament is one of the most ambiguous words that you'll find. What exactly is a deacon? The word deacon is one of the most common words in the New Testament because it simply means, "to serve." What you're going to get this morning, frankly, is what I think is most important about being a deacon, and how that sort of bears itself out here.

When Paul gives the qualifications of deacons here, it assumes a lot of the qualifications of elders, but there are three things that he lists for deacons that apparently are the most important. First he says the deacons should be dignified. That word dignified means something like sincere or serious. The three characteristics that come after it define what he means by “dignified.” The first one is “not double-tongued.” Why is it important that a deacon watch his or her tongue? It’s because deacons as they deal with people’s lives, the suffering and the misery in people’s lives they need to be able to keep things in confidence, They need to not only be able to keep things in confidence, but they need to be able to mean what they say and say what they mean. They also need to not say one thing and mean another. Imagine a deacon sitting across from someone who has a myriad of problems, a woman maybe with several children who can’t pay her rent and her husband’s abusive. She says, “If you told everyone I could never come back here.” The deacon has to be able to honor confidence. Some of you in here, especially in an economy like this, are very proud and afraid to ask the deacons for help. The deacons gave out fifty or sixty thousand dollars last year, I think. I don’t know who they gave it to because they keep it in confidence. Some of you need to know that if you do go to speak to the deacons that kept in confidence. Even if you are proud, they’re not going to tell anybody. The other thing is that a deacon can’t give false encouragement and false confidence, can they? I hate to pick on the South, but When I was in the South, people would come up to you and say, “How are you today? If there’s anything I can do for you, Pastor, you just let me know.” Now, they didn’t really mean that. I think it’s cultural, so I’m not criticizing them. But, typically in the South people often say things like that and it doesn’t even register because they don’t mean it. People learned their lesson when I was a Pastor down there because they’d say, “If you need anything, tell me.” I did. Got a washer and dryer once that way. Nonetheless, when a deacon tells someone that they’re going to help them or do something and then they don’t do it, well, that’s horrible. The deacon has to be a person of his or her word. It’s important not to be double-tongued. Not to be addicted to much wine. I hope that’s self-explanatory.

The next one is important. He says, “not greedy for dishonest gain.” The language here is actually stronger than it is for elders. It said an elder shouldn’t be a lover of money. But it says here a deacon should not be greedy for dishonest gain. The reason that that’s so important is because a lot of money passes through the hands of the deacons as I said a minute ago. Tens of thousands of dollars each year go through the hands of the deacons. A person can’t only be in it because they know, “One for you and two for me.” If that’s who they are, they’re just not the right person. The first person who was greedy for dishonest gain was Judas himself. Judas was constantly complaining. He was the keeper of the money. “Why are you doing that when we could give this money to the poor?” I have to believe that Judas didn’t care about the poor; he cared about skimming off the top for himself. Paul says that’s not the kind of person you need.

Instead you need someone who actually embraces the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. What does he mean by that? The mystery of the faith in Paul’s language is actually a technical term for something that’s not a mystery at all. It’s the mystery that has been revealed, and that is the Gospel of Jesus. He says it in chapter 1 that, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.” That is the Gospel. Are you a sinner? Let me reveal a mystery to you. Jesus came into the world to save you from your sins. Have you embraced that? To be a deacon you need to have embraced it, but more than that you have to have embraced it, Paul says, with a clear conscience.

How can someone embrace the Gospel with a clear conscience? I think the answer is in the next line. He says, “Let them be tested.” In other words, the only way you can know that a deacon or a deacon candidate in our case embraces the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience is to have had them be tested. Does that surprise you? It shouldn’t because every one of you is going to have to do it at one point or another if you haven’t already. What is the test Paul’s talking about here that’s going to reveal a clear conscience or not? Some people say a test simply has to do with theology. Before I came to the EPC I was in a denomination that was more conservative than this one theologically, and for them what that meant generally speaking was if someone is going to be a deacon you have to train for about a year in Bible study and the Westminster Confession of Faith, larger and

shorter catechisms, and the Book of Order, and at the end you have a test. If you get a decent score I guess you pass, and now you've been tested and you're good to go as a deacon. I don't think that's what Paul's talking about here. I think the test that he's talking about here has to do with something bigger than that and something more basic than that. For one thing, Paul can't be talking about a theological test because they didn't have their theology systematized yet. He can't even be talking about a Bible test because they didn't even have the Bible, at least the New Testament. They had the Old Testament. He must be talking about something else. Is there another way that you see the word "test" used in the Bible? You generally see this word "testing" used when someone has passed through the fires of affliction. The fires of affliction are the best place and maybe the only place to see whether you've really embraced the Gospel with a clear conscience. When you're sitting in your pew and thinking "Is there anyone I should nominate for the office of deacon? Is there anyone who has been tested?" Are there people who come to your mind and you say, "Yes, that person right there. They said they were Christians, they said they believed the Gospel and then the most horrible things that I've ever seen happen to anyone, happened to them. And at the backside of all of that they came through and said, 'God is faithful. I still believe the Gospel, that Jesus is faithful to me in and through the suffering as he was before my suffering.' The other reason that that's important is because the primary role (and this is my opinion, but I think the New Testament bears it out) of a deacon is empathy with people in need, who are hurting. The only way you can truly empathize with somebody—you could sympathize with people—but to really enter into their suffering is to have been through things. Can you tell people with a clear conscience, who are sitting across from you, who are experiencing what they think is hell, "I know this is bad, but it will get better"? "I know this is bad, but God is faithful. Trust me. I know. I have been there. We're going to help you pay your rent but there are bigger issues than that. We need to talk to you about the Gospel." That's what a deacon needs to do. Do you know people who are empathetic, who can identify with suffering? The whole Gospel itself, Jesus' whole mission and ministry were basically defined and driven by His empathy. We trust Jesus, the Book of Hebrews says, because we understand that He empathizes with where we are. Let me read to you Hebrews chapter 2.

¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (ESV)

The way that you can know that Jesus empathizes with you is to look and see that He has gone through the very same thing. Sin, misery, Jesus knows what it feels like. Before the incarnation, before Jesus became a man, God had an objective knowledge of our sin and misery. Jesus looked down and said, "Yep. They're sinful and miserable. Is it bad? It looks bad." But when Jesus became a man, He had a subjective knowledge of our sin and misery. He wasn't like a doctor that never did an internship. He went to school and then He actually did His residency with us. Here He experienced sin and misery and betrayal. His empathy is what drove Him to the cross.

That leads to the next point – the deacon's gender. Why does empathy lead, in my opinion, to the deacon's gender? I'm going to let you guys in on a big secret. Men and women are different. I'm serious. I'm amazed at how much fighting you see on the news and how much fighting you see in the church to make the case that men and women are not different. But at the end of the day, they are. If they weren't, God would not have needed to create two different things. He could have just created one asexual self-reproducing being and it would have been all over. Let me ask you this question about your household, or let me ask what you think about my household. For the past fifteen or sixteen years when a kid scrapes her knee very badly and comes running in the house, who do you think she goes looking for for empathy? Let me put it this way: to one parent she goes looking for empathy, to one parent she goes looking for crazy glue and bleach. I bet you thought Judy was the crazy glue one. She's not. She's the empathetic one. God seems to have wired women to be more empathetic. It's important because you need women deacons. If you look through the whole New Testament, it is women who have done the grunt work and the empathy work and the dirty work of empathy and caregiving. I'm not saying it's only the women's job because the New Testament obviously teaches male deacons. But when you look at the

ministry of Jesus, who is there with Him everyday through thick and thin? Who's with Him to the very bitter end? It's not the men. It's the women. When you look at the ministry of Paul, who cares for him? It's women. That's important because when you're thinking of, "Who should I nominate?" Not just men and it's not just husband and wives. The interesting thing is verse 11 here. Let me read it to you at least in this translation. Paul says,

¹¹ *Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*

First of all, Paul uses "likewise" again. He says, "likewise must" just as he said, "deacons likewise must." So, it seems like he's starting a different category. The translation there is notoriously hard in some ways because if you looked at three different Bibles, you could get three different translations for that phrase, "their wives." What the Greek literally says is "the women" or "the wives." So we're "gunaikav." It means either "the women" or "the wives." If you're a translator, you're sitting there thinking, "Here are qualifications for elders and here are qualifications for deacons and here are qualifications for every single wife in the whole congregation. So, he must have meant 'their wives.' So, he says, "Here's what deacons should be like and here's what their wives should be like." That's a valid way to translate this text. So what he could be meaning there is, generally speaking, the husbands who are doing a lot of deaconate work, a lot of caregiving, have their wives involved with them, so their wife needs to have the same qualities. That's one way to translate this. Another way to translate this is to say, "the women" but instead of "the women who are deacons" it could just be the "women who are helpers of the deacons" – the female helpers. Some denominations say, "You have male deacons and female deaconesses who help the male deacon." That's a valid translation. The third way that you can look at this is the way that I tend to look at it. It's the way that our church has always looked at it. "The women (period) who are deacons." In other words, the women who are deacons need to have these qualities just like the male deacons do. What are the qualities? They are very similar. He says she must be dignified, not slanderous, sober minded, faithful in all things.

Just as a side note, the word "slanderers" in the New Testament is the word "diabolos." When it's singular it means "devil." When it's plural it means "slanderers." He says, "The female deacon should not be a slanderer. She should not talk poorly. I don't know why he singles them out for one thing and the males for not being double-tongued, but either way the emphasis here, I think, is that female deacons are utterly important and crucial to the ministry. So when you're thinking about and thinking through your nominations, think of someone who who's a male or female, married or unmarried. Churches tend to do the same things over the years and you get into a rut, frankly. I remember, when I first started coming here in 2002 as a member, I somehow thought because of what I saw that you had to be a married couple in order to be a deacon. You don't. In fact if you look at the end of I Timothy Paul says that caring ministries are great jobs for widows or widowers. Besides the fact that they have time, they are generally pretty empathetic to loss.

This is just a side note, but if someone is a deacon now, some people ask, "Can I nominate them for elder?" Or if they're an elder now, "Can I nominate them for trustee?" You can. Nominate whomever you want and the nominating committee will sort through, and maybe someone who is a deacon needs to become an elder and vice-versa, but that is the job of your nominating committee.

The last thing I want to look at here before we close is the deacon's reward. In verse 13 he says,

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. (ESV)*

Last week I talked about two qualifications for elders and then the last point was how to survive as an elder. In many ways that's what this point is as well: the deacon's reward. If you remember, what it means to be a deacon is to serve. Paul says, "Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves." The phrase "good

standing” literally means something like a promotion or a step up, or an elevated position. So Paul says, “Those who serve well receive an elevated position.” Lots of commentators say, “What that means is that you have to be a deacon before you can be an elder.” Or, “you have to be a deacon before you can do something else.” Or, “you have to prove yourself as a deacon before you can teach something.” If you look back at the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—I think it’s just much simpler than that.

Have you ever heard Jesus say anything remotely like, “Those who serve will be elevated”? Let me put it a different way. Those who are last are first. Those who want to be the master of all must be the slave of all. The deacon is by the very definition a servant. The better you are at your job the more elevated you are in the eyes of the Gospel. Remember James and John and their little mistake? Mark chapter 10 verse 35 says,

³⁵ *And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”* ³⁶ *And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?”* ³⁷ *And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” . . .* ⁴¹ *And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John.* ⁴² *And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.* ⁴³ *But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your . . . (ESV)* deacon. That’s what the word is there. The word servant is the word “deacon.” Whoever would be great among you must be your deacon . . .

⁴⁴ *and whoever would be first among you must be (your slave – that’s the word “doulos” there) . . . must be slave of all.* ⁴⁵ *For even the Son of Man came not to be (deaconed) but to (deacon), and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (ESV)*

The ministry of deacons – it clicked with me even between services. That’s how dull I am sometimes. Every month the deacons stand up in front of you and say, “I have the greatest job in the church.” I sit over there thinking, “That person is crazy. They are dealing day in and day out with people who have physical needs, mental needs and they’re just constantly being barraged with requests.” Yet when I look at what Jesus says it seems the deacons do have the best job in the church. Those who are called to deaconate ministry are called to serve, and the more they serve the higher up they go. Which means I’m way down here somewhere. They have the greatest job in the church and you need to remember that if you’re nominated. If you’re like me you think, “Boy, I don’t know.” The more I thought about it this week, “You know if I was Jesus, which would be more enjoyable to me? My ministry of truth – sitting around arguing with the Pharisees who are plotting to kill me, or my ministry of tears – healing people and caring for their needs?” Every day of the week I would take the caring ministry.

The last thing Paul says in Timothy I think is important. He said they,

¹³ *. . . gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (ESV)*

The other thing I think that makes the deacon’s job one of the greatest jobs in the church is that deacons, more than any of the rest of us, get to see the Gospel work in people’s lives. If you’re not a member and you don’t do anything, you get as much as you put in, I guess. But deacons who get to sit across from people day in and day out get to see that Jesus is faithful not only to them but to these people. As Jesus is faithful to them they are built up in their faith. That is a great job to have. Think about that.