



1 TIMOTHY

SERVANTS OF THE CHURCH

WEEK 9 | 1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13, ACTS 6
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Today, we continue our study of 1 Timothy—how the New Testament church is to function as God designed, and the roles and offices in the church. We have been looking at leadership and their qualifications for the last couple of weeks. We saw that pastors/elders were set apart to shepherd the flock of Christ. That is to lead, teach, protect, and care for the body of Christ. Today, we will look at the office of deacons, which are those set aside to serve the church.

I want to be clear about something before we get into this. As always, our goal is to understand and obey God's Word. That is our aim as a church. As we look at Scripture concerning the role and qualifications of a deacon, there is no agenda or axe to grind. I say that because often, in churches, there can be a sense of disharmony amongst pastors and deacons. This shouldn't be, and typically exists due to a lack of clarity of what the Bible teaches as well as submission to what the Bible teaches. The pastors and deacons of our church have a good relationship, and the deacons who are actively serving in our church are godly men who seek to serve the church under the leadership of the pastors. As we will see, this is how the Bible defines these roles. Our aim this morning is to define what a deacon is, what they do, and the qualities that those who hold the office must meet. Refrain from reading anything into what is said today. We are talking about this because it is in the Bible, and in the near future, we will need to add to the deacon body of our church. It is important that our church knows what deacons do and the kind of person they must be.

Please do me a favor and put aside anything and everything you think you know about deacons. Whether your experience is good or bad, let's try to look at this with fresh eyes, letting the Bible inform us. I have heard many things over the years concerning deacons, but most of them are untrue. Some think the deacons are the leaders of the church who make sure the pastor(s) does his job. You won't find that in the Bible. Some go the other way and say that deacons aren't important. The Bible wouldn't affirm that either. Sadly, much of what we think of when it comes to deacons stems from the tradition of men and religion rather than from God's Word.

What does the Bible say about deacons?

Before we look at what a deacon is, let's be clear about what they're not. They are not pastors/elders. It is a completely separate role and office. So much of the confusion in church life (especially Baptist church life) is due to the blurring of these lines. We have already looked at the role of a pastor, and it is clearly different than that of a deacon. As we have seen, pastors have the role of leadership in the church, and as we will see, deacons have the role of serving in the church.

So, what does the Bible say about deacons? Believe it or not, it's a lot less than you think. While the office of elder or pastor is referenced multiple times in the Scripture, and the responsibilities are fairly specific and clear, that of deacon is referenced very little. As a matter of fact, if it wasn't for the qualifications listed here in 1 Timothy 3 and the fact that Paul addresses deacons in his address to the church of Philippi, one could question whether or not the role of deacon was even an office in the New Testament church. We do have the passage in Acts 6 that we tend to think could have been the beginning of this office; however, they are not classified as such in the passage. That being said, the Bible shines some light on this role in the church, and in some ways, I think it is beautifully vague.

The word deacon means "servant." That is precisely what a deacon is: a servant to the church and its leadership. While in one sense, every member of the church is called to be a servant, deacons are called to take the lead in serving. One theologian put it this way, "Pastors are to be servant leaders, while deacons are to be lead servants." This is a good way to think of it. All of us are called to serve, yet we do it in different ways. The word deacon was used a lot in terms of a table waiter. In Acts 6, as the church grew and the apostles were unable to meet the needs of handling some servant-related issues and still doing their job of spiritual leadership, they said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables." "Waiting on tables" is a derivative of the word deacon. In response to the need, the church was instructed to set aside seven godly men to serve in the needed capacity.

If Acts 6 sets the tone for what would later become deacon ministry, there are several things we can take away to help us understand the role of deacon.

The first is that **deacons are to serve so that pastors can lead**. The purpose of these men was to meet a specific need, so the apostles (who would later hand leadership in the church to elders or pastors) could continue to lead through the ministry of the Word. Pastors cannot do everything but must devote their time to leading the people of God to know Christ and accomplish His mission for the church. The deacons are to help the pastors fulfill this responsibility by serving where they are needed. Earlier, I said that the Bible is "beautifully vague" about exactly how the deacons are to serve. This is because, in every context, it may be a little different. Deacons are to help their church with their specific needs. The pastor(s) are to help the deacons know where they are needed and expected to minister.

Second, **deacons serve in order to minister to and benefit the body**. Deacons are not called to rule over the body but to minister to the body. This is clear from the fact that a problem arose that was leading to disunity within the church. These servants (deacons) were tasked with ensuring it was handled appropriately so unity would continue within the body. They ministered to those in need and their ministry led to a problem being solved. The result was unity being maintained and the elders being able to continue in their responsibilities. Their serving was in order to minister.

Finally, **deacons are to be spiritual servants who have the character and qualities that lead the church to trust them in this ministry**. Acts 6 refers to them as being of "good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom..." In 1 Timothy 3:8-10, 12, we see that deacons are to meet similar (but not as stringent) qualifications as the pastors, the main difference being that pastors must be able to teach while deacons don't have to possess this gift and ability. However, they "must hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." I think this is saying that they must understand the gospel, hold fast to the gospel, and live according to the gospel. After all, this is a spiritual office.

What about “wives?” (V.11)

Verse 11 can cause some interpretive challenges. Most modern translations have the word “wives,” but it could also be translated as “women.” The context determines how we interpret the word. This leads to two options. The first is that Paul is referring to the wives of deacons and if that is the case, a deacon’s wife should be expected to help him in this ministry. It is important to note and explain this to deacons and their wives if this is the case.

The other option, which I lean toward, is that Paul is referring to women deacons or deaconesses. I will tell you why I lean that way. If he is only referring to deacon’s wives, I find it odd that he wouldn’t refer to elder’s wives. Surely, the character of the wife of an elder should be as important as that of a deacon, especially when you see more importance is put on the elder’s home and that they have stricter qualifications. Second, in Scripture, we also have reference to Phoebe (Romans 16), who was called a “deaconess” or a “servant of the church” and was given responsibility by the church.

Finally, because the responsibility of deacon is that of service and not oversight of the church or teaching, I cannot find any other biblical reason why a woman could not hold that office. However, both interpretations have merit, and I submit to the historical interpretation of the church that in our church, it has been a male-only role.

I want to be clear, however, that if a church has deacons who function in an elder-type role (which, in my opinion, is not Biblical), then it wouldn't be appropriate for a church to have deaconesses in that context.

God’s way is the right way.

One of the things I want us to take away from this is that when we do things God's way and put things in the order He has designed, whether in our homes or church, we can expect it to be the best. When we trust God by doing things His way, we can expect there to be blessings and harmony as we seek the Lord together. Pray for our pastors, deacons, and church body that we would all fulfill our roles for the glory of God, the edification of the body, and the reaching of the lost.

