

“The Qualifications of Deacons”
(1 Tim. 3:8-13)

Over the past several weeks, we have been looking at the qualifications of elders to see if the Lord has given us any men like this so that we might recognize their gifts and set them apart to the work the Lord has called them to. The Lord gives His church men like this to rule and to teach His people. But there are other gifted men that He gives His church as well, men whose responsibility it is to lighten the load of the elders in certain areas so that they can do what the Lord has called them to do. These men are called deacons.

In Acts chapter 6, we read a little bit about the origin of this office. There are some who believe that this passage is referring to an office that was only temporary. There are others who believe that they were sort of proto-elders, or that this was the beginning of the office of elder. But I think it’s fairly clear that these men were actually functional deacons, and the primary reason is because of what they were doing. There was a dispute that arose in the church regarding the overlooking of the Hellenistic widows in the daily serving of food. This was a very important matter, a matter of mercy to those in need. But the apostles didn’t have time to deal with it themselves. They had even more important matters to attend to, such as the ministry of the Word and seeking the Lord in prayer. And so they came to the church and asked them to pick out from their number certain men who would be able to take the oversight of this vital ministry. But these couldn’t be just any men. They had to have certain qualifications. They had to be “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3). They chose seven men, probably because they needed that many to do the work. Thankfully, they found that the Lord had given them at least this many. This shouldn’t be surprising though, since by this time there had come to be about eight thousand in the congregation. Once they were set aside to this office by the laying on of hands and began their ministry, we read that the Word of God kept on spreading and that the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem. Even a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith (v. 7). This was because the apostles were freed up from these other obligations in order to do what Christ had called them to do, which was to devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word (v. 4). This is why the office of deacon is so vital to the well-being of the church. The things that they have to do are very important, so important that they can’t be overlooked. Theirs is a ministry of mercy. But if the elders must give their attention to that work, then their ministry in the Word and prayer will suffer, which will cause not only the church to suffer, but also the kingdom of God, since it won’t be able to advance as quickly. Deacons then are very important. We need them. The Lord knows that we need them, which is why He gives them to His church.

Now this morning I would like for us to do what we have done in the past regarding elders, namely, to look at the qualifications of deacons to see whether the Lord has given any to us. If He has, we should recognize these men as gifts from the Lord, and set them aside to that office so that they can help free up the elders to do the work Christ has called them to do.

The qualifications, as in the case of the elder, fall into different categories, in this case, at least three: moral, reputation and managerial. Let's begin by considering the moral qualifications. Since these are similar to those for the elder, I won't spend much time on them. The first is that he must be dignified, which means that he must be worthy of respect or honor. Hendriksen, in his commentary on 1 Timothy says that they must be respectable, one who has a spirit-wrought gravity (130). In other words, he must not be immature, but take the things of eternity very seriously. Secondly, he must not have a double-tongue, which means that he must not be insincere. He must not say one thing to one person and something completely different to another, like Ananias and Sapphira who sold their property for one price, but then told Peter that they sold it for another (Acts 5). He must not be addicted to much wine. Remember, wine is not forbidden in Scripture, but drunkenness is. He may drink wine, but not too much. He must not be a drunkard. He must not be fond of sordid gain. He must not be one who embezzles or pilfers money like Judas who loved to take money out of the disciples' common bag. Since the deacon's primary work has to do with collecting and distributing money to the poor as an act of mercy, you can see why this is important. He must be one who holds to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Like the elder, he needs to know the truths of the Christian faith and hold to them firmly. But unlike the elder, he's not required to be skillful in teaching them. His work will not primarily be one of teaching, but of mercy. However, in ministering the mercy and compassion of our Lord to those inside and outside the church, he will also be called upon to minister the Gospel of our Lord. This is why he must sincerely hold to it with a clear conscience, not only for his own sake – for his own salvation – but also for the salvation of others. People can tell when you are insincere, when you don't believe what you say. One of the most powerful means the Lord uses to bring the lost to Himself is the heartfelt witness of a person whose life is truly committed to the Christian faith. Finally, he must be a one woman kind of man. Again this means that he must not be a polygamist, and he must not be the kind of man who is looking to make a change in wives. He must be devoted to his wife.

So much for the moral qualifications. Let's consider for a moment the reputation qualification in Acts 6:3, as well as the general qualifications of being filled with the Spirit and wisdom. Needless to say if a man has the moral qualifications, he will have a good reputation with those inside and outside the church, and he will show that he is filled with the Spirit and wisdom. The apostles, when they asked the congregation to choose men out from among themselves, said that they must be men of good reputation. They must have a good witness in the congregation and in the community. They must be full of the Spirit, which means that their lives must be directed by their love for Christ. They must be under his control. They won't really have the other qualifications unless they have this one. And they must be full of wisdom. This is especially important when we consider the managerial qualifications. They must know godly truth and be able to apply it to real life situations. Remember that they need to have all of these qualifications and not just some of them, if they are men the Lord has given to His church as deacons.

These are the moral and reputation qualifications. Let's consider now the managerial qualifications. Deacons, like elders, are to be good managers of their children and their own households. It appears as though Paul put a great deal of stress on how a man manages his children as an indicator of his faithfulness and usefulness. If a man doesn't learn to practice piety in his own house, how can he be expected to do it outside

of his house? What we do in private, when no one else is watching us, is a good indicator of what we are really like. Since our children will be most affected by what we do in the home, looking at them should say something about our character. The man who would be a deacon must be faithful in teaching his children the ways of righteousness and in training them to walk in those ways, as well as being an example of these things to them. He must be faithful to his calling of father, which is a calling to manage the lives of his children, until they are old enough to manage their lives by themselves. But he must also be a good manager of the other aspects of his household. In this case, Paul is probably referring to the man's own finances. You can imagine the kind of difficulties the church would experience if we placed a man in charge of our finances who wasn't able to manage his own. He may very well waste and squander the resources entrusted to him for the ministry of the Gospel. The man who would be a deacon must be faithful in both areas – with regard to his children and his own household – before he shows himself qualified to take up the ministry of mercy in God's house. If a man shows that he has these management qualifications, as well as the moral and reputation qualifications, then he demonstrates that he has the kind of gifts and maturity necessary to be a deacon.

But now I would like to spend a little time looking at verse 11 regarding women. Paul here almost appears to be saying that women too can be deacons. But is this what he means? I don't think it is, since there isn't any indication in Scripture that women ever held office in Christ's church. The conferring of office requires the laying on of hands, as we see in the case of deacons in Acts 6 and of elders in 1 Timothy 4:14. But there aren't any examples of women ever being ordained. Some believe that the reference to Phoebe as a deacon in Romans 16:1 indicates that there were deaconesses in the early church. But Paul may simply have meant that she was a very helpful servant who ministered to the needs of the saints, since the word "deacon" also means servant. But if women aren't to serve as deacons, then why does Paul include them here in the qualifications of deacons? Some have suggested that the women he refers to here are the deacons' wives, that they must meet certain qualifications before their husbands are qualified. But this doesn't seem to be the case, since there aren't any such qualifications for elders' wives. What does Paul mean then? I believe that he was probably referring to women who were being set aside to be assistants to the deacons. Obviously, there were certain needs that were important that male deacons wouldn't be able to meet, such as giving assistance to young widows or to other women. Propriety, the need to avoid temptation, and the avoidance of the appearance of evil would all dictate that women were needed to minister to other women. Therefore, some were set aside to this work. Perhaps this is what Phoebe was doing. In order to do this, these women needed certain qualifications. Whenever someone represents the church, he or she also represents Christ, which is why it's important that they have a certain level of maturity. They needed to be dignified, or worthy of respect, as we saw above. They must not be malicious gossips, or slanderous. The word literally is devils. Things that they might learn from ministering to others must not be spread around to the damage of another's reputation. This is something that appears to be a particular weakness in women, although men don't entirely escape it. They must be temperate, which means they must have control of their spirits and not be easily given to any passion. And they must be faithful, which means they must be reliable or trustworthy. They're able to get the job

done. If a woman had these qualifications, then she had what she needed to help the deacons.

We've seen that the role of the deacon is a ministry of mercy, a ministry which is spiritual in nature – which is why they needed to be filled with the Spirit and wisdom – but that deals more with the material aspects of the work of the church. Deacons were originally called to help the elders by freeing them up so that they might be able focus more on the ministry of the Word and prayer. In order to qualify they had to be mature Christians and they had to manage their households well. We have also seen that there were women in the early church who also helped the deacons in their work by ministering in the more sensitive areas. Finally, I want us to consider the need to test those who would serve in this office and the reward those who minister faithfully will receive. Paul says that those who would hold this office must first be tested. Obviously, they must be tested in the area of the qualifications to make sure they are qualified, and they must be tested in their ability to perform this office so that they might show not only that they are gifted to do it, but also that their ministry will be a blessing to the church. In some cases, a church's ministry of mercy may receive the most attention in the community. It may be what makes the church most noticeable to those outside. Since this is the case, the deacon must be a good representative of Christ. This is why they must first be tested to make sure they are beyond reproach, so that they will represent Him accurately and not bring reproach on the church.

But lastly, Paul also speaks of the reward that a deacon can expect to receive for doing this work faithfully. He says not only will they “obtain for themselves a high standing,” but also “great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (v. 13). They will stand out in the eyes of the church because of their faithfulness in their calling, and they will strengthen their assurance that they are Christ's, which will give them greater boldness in their work. There are benefits to faithfulness. When we serve the Lord faithfully, rather than reluctantly, the Lord reveals Himself more to our souls, giving to us a greater sense of His presence in our lives, which is one of the greatest blessings we can have. This is something the faithful deacon can expect to receive. But there are other blessings, as well. We know from the Scriptures that the more we give ourselves to the work of Christ, the more we sacrifice, the more we obey from a gracious and thankful heart, the greater our reward will be from the One who will give to every man according to his works (Rom. 2:6). The one who faithfully serves as a deacon can look forward to a greater reward.

But these promises aren't only for the deacon, nor for the elder, but to all Christians who give of themselves freely to serve and honor the One who died to redeem them. This promise is to each one of us here. Each of us can stand out in some way through our service to Christ's body and to those outside. Each of us can strengthen our assurance by being faithful. Each of us can also increase our reward in heaven by being diligent now on earth. This is the way we should direct our lives. We should live each day in light of the fact that we will be judged one day according to what we have done, and we should do all in our power to serve and honor our Lord now while we can. But let's also remember that our Lord gives us His gracious help in this work, through the means of grace, which He died to give us. And so as we prepare to come to the table, let's look again to Christ for His strength and for the encouragement that we need to be faithful, that we might have these rewards. Amen.