

Title: Dignified Deaconing¹
Text: 1 Timothy 3.8-13
Theme: Servants of Christ and the church
Series: I Timothy
Prop Stmtnt: Servanthood is so important for the church, that Christ established a formal position for it.

Read Text:

The 3rd Sunday of January is Sanctity of Life Sunday. The Supreme Court's infamous Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 gave legal protection to murdering unborn children. The number of children who have been aborted in our country stands at 60,000,000. That staggering statistic is only part of the scourge. This darkness has accelerated a culture of death, shame and narcissism. Speaking up for those who have no voice and standing up for those who cannot defend themselves has been the Christian church. To many in the media, we are an enormous irritant who ought to be silenced. But, we are only doing what we are and only doing what we have always done. Christianity is a culture of life in the midst of a culture of death. That was so in the 1st Century. The Roman Empire experienced growth in urban areas. As people came to the cities for economic benefit, or as slaves, the concentration of humans created conditions that enabled diseases to spread like wildfire. Whenever plagues would come, those who could would leave for their cabins up north, (actually, their villas in the countryside) and would wait it out. But in the cities, people would die by the thousands. In an effort to get help, people would go to the temples only to find the pagan priests had left the city like everyone else. But, the Christians did not abandon their own. In fact, the early believers were so committed to one another that when one got sick, they cared for that person at their own risk. And while some of the caregivers got sick and died, they were also able to save many of their own because they valued life. The early church spread, not because of a marketing strategy. The early believers out loved and therefore, out lived their world. And at the bedsides of the sick, wiping their brows and praying, were the deacons and deaconesses.

Caring for personal and practical needs has been a mark of the gospel from the birth of the church. James says that caring for the widows and the orphans is one of the marks of authentic Christianity. In I Timothy 5, we see that the church is not responsible for all of the widows in the city, but for the widows who are members of the church. This is so important, that the church has a designated position of leadership called deacons. It all started in Acts 6, where a seemingly small issue threatened the existence of the church.

I. **It's more than food.** (Acts 6) (background and definition)

In spite of the initial persecution, the church in Jerusalem exploded. That was the good news. The growth meant increased responsibility to care for everyone, particularly the

¹ Deaconing is actually not a word, but I am coining it to explain the act of serving as a deacon.

widows. From its very beginning, the early church cared for its widows, but there was a problem and it was not simply logistics. Some of the widows were not getting their meals on wheels but there was a pattern. The Jewish Hebrew-speaking widows were getting their meals, but the Jewish Greek-speaking widows were not getting theirs.

This problem revealed that some persons were deliberately making decisions that were effectively betraying the gospel. If the early church, which was overwhelmingly Jewish, was treating some of its own Jewish members as being second-rate, what on earth would happen if Samaritans and Gentiles ever started coming to faith ?

The apostles knew that this issue had to be addressed, but how? If they stopped their teaching ministry in order to get to the bottom of this, then the mission of the church would suffer. If, however, they did not address this, then the message and mission of the church would suffer. This was a problem that had to be addressed, but the church cannot afford to neglect the teaching of the Word and prayer in order to address problems, no matter how serious they may be. Therefore, the apostles called upon the church to identify 7 men, known to the congregation, whose lives were marked by being under the control of the Spirit of God and were full of wisdom. The church did that, and the apostles charged these brothers with the responsibility of addressing this matter. What started as a response to a specific situation set the stage for a recognized position in the church. When we get to 1 Timothy, we read here in chapter 3 about deacons. Deacon is a word that means servant. Don't miss this. ***Servanthood is so important to the church and for the church that Christ established a formal position for it.*** A deacon was (and therefore is to be) a qualified member of the church charged with a practical ministry that enables the gospel to go forward and the health of the church advance. (Application opportunity throughout the sermon to consider the following: do I actually serve others? How? When I serve, is my heart focused on advancing the joy and growth of another, or just on doing my job?)

The qualifications listed in our text make it clear that Christ views this position as more than someone who simply follows orders or is gifted at organization. These qualifications are evidences of doctrinal competency, clear testimony, excellent character, and faithful home life. And going back to the example in Acts 6, and see why this is important.

Someone was intentionally not serving certain widows. Is that a logistics problem? No! If you were one of those widows or if you knew about it, how would that affect your ability to hear and process the teaching of the elders and apostles? You would most likely be distracted because part of what they were talking about in terms of God not being a respecter of persons is not what your experience is. You would be skeptical and possibly embittered. Someone needs to minister to you. You are being wronged by someone in your church and while that is not supposed to happen, it is happening.

But that is only part of the problem. Someone has made the decision not to distribute the food to the other widows. Someone is using a position of ministry in the church to make certain people feel as if they are not good enough, or that they are not wanted. Why is this happening? Who knows?! Due to the fact that there is an internal cultural issue going on,

it could be that certain Greek-speaking widows were complaining about the menu, or complaining about how the food was served, or complaining about who was serving the food. So, the people who were organizing this, said, fine, get your own food! I don't know, and apparently the apostles and early elders did not know either, but knew that if they took the time to investigate this, then the ministry of the Word was going to suffer.

So, they called upon the church to raise the budget, so that they could add 7 guys onto the payroll who would organize and run the most efficient widow-feeding program the 1st century world had ever seen – right? No! They identified godly men in the congregation who could and would help address this issue and find out what is going on and minister the word to people at the heart level. So, yes, there was an organizational issue, but there was a heart issue that was deeper. These *deacons are like the shock absorbers for a congregation*. What an enormous gift this is to the church!

Practical issues are opportunities for growth in godliness. Deacons are charged with a practical ministry that enables the gospel to go forward and the health of the church advance. Some of the widows were neglected. There were probably some hard feelings and bitterness brewing. The deacons had to do more than get the meals distributed fairly, they had to help all parties resolve that issue and that issue was not easy to resolve. But it was critical because in chapter 8, the gospel was going to Samaria and in chapter 10 it was going to the Gentiles. And the early church in Jerusalem which was made primarily of Jews needed to be ready to accept that and even rejoice in it. We get some insight into this in Acts 11, when Peter, of all people, is criticized by some of the people in the church in Jerusalem for preaching the gospel and fellowshiping with Gentiles! Some of the Jews are angry with him. Their Jewishness was more important to them, than the gospel. Is that right? No! That attitude is actually anti-gospel, because the purpose of the gospel is to raise up a people for Christ who are from every tribe, language and nation. In theory that sounds okay, but living that out can be messy. So, what does the church need? It needs people who understand that vision and who will help people who have racial or generational resentment and wrong beliefs confront this so that the church looks more and more like the kingdom that is coming. Deacons are more than people who do jobs behind the scene; they are people who use the opportunities of tasks that need to be done to help the people of the church grow in Christ. That is why the qualifications of deacon have more to do with spiritual growth and competency than being handy with tools and spreadsheets. Deacons are spiritual shock-absorbers for the a congregation.

II. **Servant Leadership is crucial.** (3.8-13)

Serving one another is so important that a specific office is created. The position of deacon is a God-ordained position of leadership in the church. And because deacon means servant, this position is designed to influence the church by leveraging.

A. **Specified**

In Paul's letter to the believers at Philippi he opens by saying, "*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers (elders) and deacons:*" (1.1)

When you think about it, it makes sense why Christ would want the church to specifically identify a position of leadership in the church and call it "servant." Serving one another is something that we are all responsible to do. And since that is the case, we need people who will lead by example and who because of their spiritual maturity are able to help others who are serve iron out problems that are going to arise when people serve together.

Some people are more spiritually mature than others, and when people of different maturity levels serve together, those differences are exposed. Have you ever served and had your feelings hurt? Have you ever served and you hurt someone else's feelings? The church is not like that Lego movie where "everything is awesome." Ministry in the church needs specific leaders who are qualified to help people serve in a humble and faithful manner. Note the qualifications.

B. Qualified

The qualifications of a deacon are very close to that of an elder. The emphasis is on character. When you look at the qualifications of an elder, it appears to me that the list starts with a general category description (above reproach) and the rest of the qualifications flush that out. I think that the same thing is going on here. "Dignified" is the heading and what follows is a more detailed explanation of what this looks like. What should be noted is that everything listed is a character quality. Unlike the position of elder, which demands the ability to teach, the office of deacon says nothing about ability, but only character. I would argue that every single member of this church should be pursuing these qualities and if you have been a follower of Christ for at least five years, then these ought to be what your life looks like. A congregation like this is going to be a joy to one another. People who serve one another and serve together whose lives are characterized by this are going to be a joy together.

1) Not double-tongued.

A deacon does not say one thing to one person and another to someone else. A deacon does not use half-truths or flattery to get a job done. Life together as members of the same church means that people are going to enter into our personal space. That is good, if the person entering in is someone you can trust. This quality is so powerful in creating such encouraging relationships! Do you want to love others? Don't gossip and don't let others gossip.

2) Not addicted to much wine

This is someone who does not struggle with getting drunk. Part of the obvious reason is that you have to be able to trust this person and there are people who are in bondage to alcohol and they need brothers and sisters to help them.

3) Not greedy for dishonest gain.

Once again, like an elder, this person is honest in financial dealings and demonstrates a spirit of contentment.

4) Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience

Have you ever invited someone to go out to eat with you and you picked the restaurant? What usually happens? If the other person is not familiar with the place they will most likely look at you and say, “what’s good here?” or “what do you usually get?” if you pick the restaurant, the other person assumes that you have at least some familiarity with the menu. In the same way, a deacon is someone that we could ask about the beliefs of the church. A deacon should be able to answer the question – “what do you believe here?” And not only should the deacon be able to answer it, but the other person should not be surprised by it and what is more, the other person should not be confused by what you claim to believe and by your life. They ought to match up.

5) Tested

Serving in the church is not all smiles. Sometimes people do not do what they say they are going to do. When others fail to keep their commitments, it is easy to think that you can quit on yours too, right? A person who is seasoned in serving in the church knows the ups and downs that come with it. Their track record makes it clear that they are in it for the long haul. In fact, they are blameless.

6) Blameless

Blameless does not mean sinless, it means that there are no outstanding unresolved issues. There is nothing that someone could legitimately use against them. According to verse 12...

7) Their home life is to be commendable.

The man is a one-woman, man and like an elder he manages his children and his household well. I dealt with this last week, so I won’t repeat all of that here.

But, I skipped over verse 11. The ESV translates this as “their wives.” Translators put in a footnote because the original language is generic. It could be translated as wives or women. If it is translated as wives then it is referring to the wives of the deacons which would indicate that there are qualifications for the deacons wives and not just for the deacons. But, hold the phone. Is it not odd that the Scriptures would have qualifications for the deacon’s wives but not for the elder’s wives? The answer to that has been well, deacons had to involve their wives in what they did. But wait, as if elders’ wives aren’t? But, there is something else that I think speaks to this. Look at v.11. How does it start? It says, “Deacons likewise”. The same word translated “likewise” in 3.11 and 3.8 also

appears in 2.9 as well as Titus 2.3 and 6. In each of those cases this word changes the topic to women (not wives) so as to introduce another category that is related to what is already in view. In other words, Paul consistently uses this word “likewise” to say how what he has just been talking about refers to women, not just wives.

When I became the pastor, Cornerstone had the position of deaconess. I hadn’t studied that issue before, so at that time I did a preliminary study and concluded that the language of the text allowed it, so I was fine. However, the more I look at the flow of thought, and the grammar, I am convinced that it is not only allowed, I think that it is what Paul was articulating. The women who serve as deacons (deaconesses) are to be qualified like the deacons. And the reason why it appears to be abruptly inserted right here is because the following qualifications do not apply to women because women are not the rulers in their homes. Therefore, the additional qualifications that Paul lays in verse 12 pertain to the men and not to the women.

So, in summary: The office of elder is only for men because it is a ruling office and a teaching office. The office of deacon is for men and women because it is not primarily a teaching or ruling office, but it is a critical position of ministry in the church that both men and women are called to do.

C. Affirmed

Now, once again, this office is to be filled by members of the church who set the mark and call the other members of the church to keep the pace. These deacons and deaconesses serve and they influence the culture of the congregation by encouraging all of us to care for one another and serve one another.

Our formal positions of deacon and deaconess are those who men and women who serve on the Finance Team, the Missions Team and the Membership Team. We have other ministries that have the fingerprint of deaconing all over it, like the care committee, the Titus 3.14 ministry, the Health and Wellness Ministry, the Shut-in ministry and the Good Samaritan Team. I think that the Elders might in the future look at how we might want to designate some of the ministry positions as formally deacons and deaconesses and as we publicly affirm the elders and pray over them; perhaps we ought to do the same with those serving as deacons.

Since the scriptures do not assign specific jobs to the deacons, it leads me to conclude that it is up to each congregation to apply this in a manner that works best for their setting. This is how we do it. On the whole, I am excited about the level of care that our congregation has for one another. We certainly have a ways to go, but I see the direction. I see the momentum. I hear the heart and some of the stories about how you serve each other and can affirm the fact that serving one another is not seen as a job for deacons, but is a growing heartbeat of our membership.

III. Servant Leadership is beautiful. (3.13)

A. Encouraging

This sounds a bit strange, doesn't it? But this literally means that those who serve others will be esteemed by the congregation. I called this encouraging because those who serve others are people who do it NOT to be esteemed by others. Deaconing is behind the scenes, one on one, taking someone to a doctor's appointment, fixing a gutter, and personal ministry stuff. But, when personal ministry matters to a congregation it is encouraging not only to the person who is serving, but it is encouraging to the entire congregation. It is easy to esteem public talent and giftedness. But a congregation that esteems private ministry is reflecting maturity.

B. Grounding

The second phrase says that the result of faithful service will result in great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus is speaking of how for the person who is serving, their own faith will deepen and their own relationship to Christ will be stronger. Honestly, one of the ways to deepen your walk as a believer is to serve one another. Now, recognize the need to study the Word and therefore we emphasize that. There are many Bible studies going on. But that study is fuel for life and service. How are you serving? How are you serving members of this church? As followers of Christ, the church is not an event that I attend to boost me in life. The church is a family to which I belong. Men are to lead their families well, so that they are in a position to serve the church more effectively. The church is ground zero for the Kingdom of God and in the kingdom, we will serve one another because we were brought into the church on the basis of our King who served us in an ultimate sense by dying for us.

Concl. Philippians 2.5-11