

The Rightly Ordered Church:
Deacons: Those Who Serve Well (1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-6)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 22, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ I've been told that one of the hardest, most demanding jobs is serving tables, that is, being a waiter or waitress. I've never done it myself, but I can imagine why. I'm just picturing the hustle and bustle of waiting tables, taking orders, absorbing criticism, receiving complaints, navigating back and forth between multiple tables seated with demanding, self-absorbed, hard to please customers.
 - ▶ **It's so easy to take your waiter or waitress for granted.** There are times we're so wrapped in our own conversation, in our own world, that we know there's a waiter there serving us but we barely acknowledge him. We don't even look him in the eyes. How many times have you gone to a restaurant, been served by the same waiter the entire time, but by the end of the meal when you're ready for the bill – you look around confused because you can't remember who your server is? You don't remember his name or face. They work so hard to serve us and yet we take them for granted. We overlook them because, to us, they're just waiters.
 - But to God, they're far more. **To God, waiters are the great ones. In his economy, servers hold a high place of honor.** He never takes them for granted. His eyes are always on them.

- ❖ Friends, that's the point of today's message. **It's about the high calling of table-waiters within the economy of God.** In case you're not aware, they're also known as deacons. Did you realize the first deacons of the early church were literally table-waiters? They served food to needy widows in the church. And yet theirs was not a menial task that you could easily overlook. They provided a valuable, honorable service to the church and to the Lord.

- ❖ That's what Paul is trying to get across in today's passage. We've been going through the book of 1 Timothy and spent the last two weeks talking about church elders. About who they are, what do they do in the church, and who qualifies to be one according to chapter 3:1-7. As we move on, Paul addresses the church deacons, similarly helping us understand who gets to be one and why should anyone aspire to the task.
 - ▶ And that's the question I'd like us to consider: **Why should anyone want to be a deacon?** From a biblical point of view I think there are plenty of good, honorable reasons to deacon, to serve. But those reasons may not be all that obvious to us.

- ❖ **I understand if many of you have very little interest in serving as a deacon.** It seems like a lot of work. A huge time commitment. Too big of a responsibility. Now I don't want to minimize the amount of time and effort it requires to faithfully serve as a church deacon. But I'd argue that the honor and blessing of deaconing outweighs any of the difficulties and sacrifices. **My goal this morning is to paint a big, beautiful, biblical picture of what it means to be a deacon and what deaconing should look like in the church.** And I hope it inspires many of you to want to serve in that capacity.
 - ▶ I plan to use a similar format as when I preached on elders, so I'll be asking four questions. 1) Who are the deacons? 2) What do deacons do? 3) Who qualifies to be a deacon? 4) Why serve as a deacon?

Who Are The Deacons?

- ❖ Let's begin by asking: Who are the deacons? Now I think it'll help to answer our question from a general sense first and then from a specific sense. **From a general sense, the Bible describes every follower of Christ as a deacon.** I get this idea from Mark 10.
 - ▶ **In this section of Mark, two of Jesus's disciples were jostling for power and position in his inner circle** – under the assumption that Jesus was about to liberate Israel from the Romans, establish his kingdom, and sit upon his rightful throne as the Son of David. So they said to him, *“Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”* (10:37) They wanted positions of power.

- ❖ Now Mark tells us that the other disciples were indignant at their attempt to one up them. They just wished they had asked first. So Jesus called the Twelve together 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.”* (10:42)
 - ▶ **His point is that, by jostling for power and position, you're acting like the Romans that you so despise.** The rulers of the Gentiles lord their authority over others. They throw their weight around and exercise authority in such a way as to make you feel small and make them seem great.

- ❖ *“But it shall not be so among you”*, Jesus says. **Among his followers, the categories are reversed. They've been looking at things upside down. So Jesus has to redefine greatness for them.** He goes on to say vv43-44, *“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”*
 - ▶ According to the world, the great ones in society are waited on hand and foot. They have an entourage of servants to do their bidding. **But Jesus argues that true greatness doesn't belong to the one who has many servants. It belongs to the one who gladly serves.** *“Whoever would be great among you must be your servant”*.

- ❖ In my ESV, there's a footnote next *servant* that says the Greek word is *diakonos*. It's where we get the English word *deacon*. The literal translation of that 'table waiter'. As we said, the first deacons of the early church literally waited on tables for needy widows.
 - ▶ **In the economy of God, the great ones – destined to receive glory and honor – are not the kings and queens of the earth, not the rich and famous, not the high and mighty – but the table waiters, the servants, the deacons.**

- ❖ **Christian, in this general sense, if you're not a deacon, then in what sense are you a follower of Jesus?** If you're not a deacon, you're not following in the way of your Master who said he came *“not to be served but to serve.”* (10:45). Not to be the object of deaconing but to deacon – to serve others.
 - ▶ If serving (deaconing) doesn't describe you – if it doesn't characterize your life – then you're still operating according to the pattern of this world. You're seeking greatness and significance in all the wrong ways. **Jesus has flipped the categories, and he's now calling you to be a deacon – to be a servant to all.**

- ❖ That's what it means to be a deacon in the general sense. But in the specific sense, which is how Paul uses it in 1 Timothy 3:8, we're describing a particular office of leadership in the church. **In a specific sense, the deacons are a select group of qualified men and women in a church who have been appointed to a recognized position of leadership.**
 - ▶ Now that word *diakonos* is used 29 times in the Greek NT, but only three (maybe four) instances refer specifically to an officeholder of the church. Two occurrences are found in our passage, in **1 Timothy 3:8 and 12**. The other clear instance is in **Philippians 1:1** where Paul addresses his letter to "*all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.*"
 - And the fourth (though debatable) occurrence is in **Romans 16:1** where Paul identified a sister named Phoebe as, "a servant (*diakonon*) of the church". Your Bible might have a footnote that says "or deaconess". That's a possible translation. It's debatable. We'll come to it later in the message.
- ❖ So there's a general sense in which all Christians are called to be deacons (don't take that lightly), and there's a specific sense in which some Christians, within the life of the local church, are called to serve in a leadership capacity within a recognized office called *deacon*.

What Do Deacons Do?

- ❖ Now before we consider who gets to serve in that position, let's talk about what they do with in the life of the church. This is our second question: What do deacons do? To answer that, turn with me to Acts 6:1, and we'll consider the circumstances surrounding the first instance of the early church appointing a team of deacons.
 - ▶ **By the time you get to Acts 6, the early church is established and growing but it's under attack.** The gospel is spreading like wildfire. Revival is breaking out. And so the enemy steps up his attack.
 - In chapter 5, Satan tries to **corrupt the church** by hypocrisy from the inside. We read about Ananias and Sapphira in vv1-11. At the same time, he tries to **suppress the church** by persecution from the outside. That's what we see in vv12-42. But since those efforts don't seem to work, the enemy tries in chapter 6 to **distract the church** by sowing division and preoccupying their elders.
- ❖ Acts 6:1 introduces us to a controversy that's been brewing between two groups within the church. It says the church was growing, "*disciples were increasing in number*". Lot's of good things were happening. **But with growth comes challenges. As the vine grows, the trellis needs adjustment to accommodate the growth.**
 - ▶ Good gardeners know this. **If you don't make necessary adjustments to the trellis, it will eventually stifle the growth and fruitfulness of the vine.** In the same way, as a church grows, good overseers are going to wisely adjust church structures (which includes its leadership structure) in order to accommodate growth. Otherwise the outdated structures will eventually become an obstacle to growth and fruitfulness.

- ❖ So in the early church, due to exponential growth, there was a strain felt between two groups – between the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) and the Hebrews (Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians). Apparently the widows among the Hellenists were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.
 - ▶ **Much of the tension had to do with the cultural differences between these two groups.** They shared the same ethnicity (both Jewish) and the same faith (both Christians), but they spoke two different languages and culturally they were worlds apart. These differences led to tension and the tension led to feelings of resentment. The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians were likely newer to the church and smaller in size, and they were feeling like their needs and concerns were being overlooked and ignored. That contributed to a growing divide between the two sides.

- ❖ Does this sound familiar? **Anyone who has spent enough time in an immigrant church knows what it feels like to experience cultural and linguistic divides within one body.** And those on the English-speaking side know what it's like to feel like certain needs and concerns go unmet and unaddressed. We feel like complaining. That's nothing new. **We complain in the immigrant church; they complained in the early church.** It's the same problem. Look at Acts 6:1, "*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.*"
 - ▶ **And just as the problem between two culturally-distinct groups in the church is not new, neither should be the solution.** We don't need to reinvent the wheel. If we experience tensions, divisions, and distractions as a church, we should turn to the same solution as found in Acts 6. **Let's appoint deacons.** Let's choose individuals "*good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.*" (6:3) In this case, they were specifically asked to wait on tables.

- ❖ Now here in the text we see three things that deacons are to do. **First, they care for the physical needs of the church.** Every church member is responsible for meeting the spiritual needs of their fellow members. We're all responsible to pray for each other, to exhort each other, and to bear each other's burdens. If you're a member of this church, you're responsible for your fellow member's discipleship to Christ. And they're responsible for yours.
 - ▶ **But in the life of the church, there are many physical needs where it's simply not practical to expect every member to respond and be responsible.** So we give that responsibility to a specific individual or to a smaller group of people.

- ❖ In the Jerusalem church, they appointed seven godly men to the ministry of food distribution for widows. **Considering the size of the church, it's likely they didn't do all the work themselves but exercised practical leadership, mobilizing and equipping others.**
 - ▶ We do something similar in our context. When it comes to the maintenance of our facility, the management of our finances, the logistical organization of our ministries – we appoint deacons to such tasks. Not to do all the work but to facilitate others in meeting the physical, practical needs of the church.

- ❖ But behind the goal of meeting these needs, deacons are aiming at a higher end. This is the second thing they're suppose to do: **Deacons work for the unity of the church.** Think about the Seven in Acts 6. Yes, they were tasked with a very practical job meeting very physical needs. But remember what was behind the problem.
 - ▶ **The mismanagement and neglect of physical needs was sowing spiritual disunity and division within the church body.** It was a serious threat to their unity and to their gospel witness. So beyond meeting physical needs, these deacons were trying to head off and prevent any fracturing of the church's unity in Christ.

- ❖ We're going to talk in a minute about what to look for when choosing deacon, but just take note here that the kind of person you're looking for is a glue guy. Not someone who's polarizing. Not someone who's turf and mainly concerned for the needs of his or her group. You don't want a lobbyist among the deacons. **You want a glue guy. Someone who holds a group together, who reaches across lines and draws people together.** Especially in a multi-cultural church like ours, you want deacons who understand and appreciate the differences between our cultures, who recognize the strengths and weaknesses of each culture, and who work hard to bridge divides and maintain the unity of the church.

- ❖ So deacons care for the physical needs of the church, work for the unity of the church, and **third, they support the ministry of the Word.** That means supporting the work of the overseers/elders/pastors. As we've already covered, the primary responsibility within the church to guard and teach sound doctrine falls upon the church elders. That's an extremely important task that requires much time and attention.
 - ▶ **And to safeguard the time and attention needed for the ministry of the Word, deacons were developed.** Look at v2, *"²And 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. ³Therefore, 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. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."⁴*

- ❖ **Don't misinterpret that as suggesting the ministry of the Word is more important than deaconing.** It's not saying that pastoral work is superior to diaconal work. This is not an issue of whose ministry is more important. **This is an issue of calling – being faithful to the ministry calling that God has apportioned to each.**

- ❖ **The apostles, and eventually the elders who followed, are called to ministry that is primarily Word-based. But the ministry of deacons is primarily work-based.** Deacons are *not* called to teach or exercise authority (1 Tim. 2:12). Elders specifically are. Deacons are to support the elders by doing the important task of meeting needs and maintaining unity, which then allows elders to focus on the task of overseeing and pastoring the church.

- ❖ **One application here is that you definitely don't want to choose a deacon who doesn't appreciate the importance (the centrality) of the preaching and teaching ministry of the church.** The church only grows and is only fruitful by the ministry of the Word. So anyone who diminishes the importance of Word-based ministries to focus more on work-based ministries, that person wouldn't have been chosen in Acts 6. **Those seven deacons were anxious to protect the ministry of the Word and prayer.** They were zealous to see their elders freed and undistracted in order to better do their job. That's what a good deacon does.

Who Qualifies To Be A Deacon?

- ❖ Now let's focus on in depth on our passage in 1 Timothy 3 and ask our third question: Who qualifies to be a deacon? **Let me start by diving into the sticky question of whether or not women can serve as deacons.** I recognize that between complementarians – who believe Scripture assigns primary leadership in the home and church to men – there's disagreement on how to interpret v11. **Is it referring to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses?**
- ❖ I see strengths in both arguments, but I've landed on the side of supporting deaconesses and that's been the historical practice of our church. Let me offer four brief reasons. **First off, the ESV says "their wives" so its primary translation sees it as referring to wives of deacons, but the possessive pronoun "their" is actually not in Greek.** It's an added gloss, but that's why there's a footnote letting you know there's an alternative translation. It could be translated simply as "*Women* likewise must be dignified". It's the same Greek word that could be translated *women* or *wives* depending on the context.
 - ▶ **Second, the use of the word "likewise" appears to introduce a new group of people in the same way "deacons" were introduced in v8.** That would mean in v11 that Paul is addressing a new group of leaders – deaconesses. Granted, he seems to double back in v12 and address deacons once again, so it's admittedly disjointed. But that in itself doesn't rule out the possibility that Paul is speaking here to deaconesses.
- ❖ **Third, we can point back to Phoebe is Romans 16:1 whom Paul calls, "a servant (diakonon) of the church".** And since the masculine form of *diakonos* is used to refer to a woman, it suggests that, by that time, the term has become standardized when referring to the specific office of the church. And a sister was serving in that office.
 - ▶ **But the fourth (and most compelling reason to me) is that Scripture doesn't assign deacons any duties that, in themselves, would contradict what Paul taught in chapter 2:12 about not permitting a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man.** So since deacons are not called to lead the church but to serve the church, I think v11 likely refers to women who serve as deaconesses.
 - But regardless of whether it's referring to the wives of deacons or the sisters themselves, these women in v12 are to be of high character. It says they "*must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.*"

- ❖ Based on these verses, there are three general ways to describe those who qualify to be deacons. **First, they are those who exhibit self-mastery.** Look back at v8, "*Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.*" In other words, those whom you appoint as deacons must demonstrate self-mastery in their behavior, their speech, and their use of alcohol and money. Anyone characterized by recklessness, by insincerity, by compulsive behavior, or by self-indulgent greed – such individuals are not qualified to be deacon. Deacons must be men and women who are of high character and worthy of our respect.

- ❖ **Second, deacons are those who have sound doctrine.** Even though deacons are not required to be able to teach like elders, many of them are gifted and able and do teach in the church. But regardless all deacons must have sound theology. Look at v9, "*They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.*"
 - ▶ The mystery of the faith is not referring to some cryptic secret but to the sound doctrines of the faith revealed to us in Scripture. So deacons need good theology. Let's do away with the notion that deacons are merely practical leaders. **They're still spiritual leaders who need to know what they believe, to know what the church believes, and to hold to those beliefs without reservation, with a clear conscience.**
 - That's why we don't choose deacons on the basis of their professional skills ("*He's really good with numbers. He has a lot of experience serving on boards.*") or their social skills ("*She knows lots of people. She'd represent her congregation well.*"). No, deacons need to be spiritual leaders of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, and those who have sound doctrine.

- ❖ **The third general qualification is that deacons are those who have been tested and approved.** Look at v10, "*And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.*" In other words, don't be quick to lay hands on someone and elevate them into such a position of leadership without testing them first. That's why it's not wise to hand new converts or new members this kind of responsibility – to serve as a deacon or even as a small group leader or fellowship leader. The congregation needs time to know the person better, to assess the soundness of their life and doctrine.
 - ▶ And the best place to look to determine if the prospective deacon is faithful and blameless is to consider their home life. **How well an individual serves his wife or her husband or their children will indicate how well they'll serve the church.** That's what v12 is trying to say, "*Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.*"

- ❖ Church, we have a great opportunity to apply this text. **We're beginning our annual process of identifying individuals to serve as church deacons for the coming year.** And I'm excited that our Council has approved a few new English-specific positions, which will provide greater leadership to the various ministries on the English-side, as well as give opportunity for more of you to step into this honorable task.

- ▶ In a few weeks, all church members will have a chance to suggest names to the nomination committee for consideration. Forms will be available soon. And now that you're equipped with this text, take time to prayerfully consider who might fit these qualifications and who might thrive in the office of deacon.

Why Serve As A Deacon?

- ❖ Let's conclude with this question: Why serve as a deacon? Perhaps this morning, for the first time, you're open to the idea. Or perhaps you'll be nominated in the months to come. **Why should you serve?** Paul gives an answer in v13, "*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.*"
- ❖ **So one reason you should be open to being a deacon is because if you serve well you gain a good standing. You'll hold a place of high honor in the church.** Now if that sounds wrong, if that sounds self-serving to you, it's because you're still too accustomed to the ways of the world. Think back to Mark 10. Jesus never actually condemned his disciples for wanting to be great and do something great for the sake of the kingdom (Mk. 10:43). But he did make the point that greatness is only achieved by servanthood, by deaconing.
 - ▶ **There's a difference between seeking honor and seeking to honor yourself; between seeking glory and seeking to glorify yourself.** Trying to glorify yourself is wrong. That's the way of the world. But if you seek glory through obedience to God's Word and faithfulness in serving his Church, that's commendable. That's the way of the cross. **Friends, Jesus is the ultimate deacon.** He gladly identified himself as a *diakonos* in Mark 10:45. He said he "*came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*"
- ❖ Why should you serve as a deacon? Not because you're trying to honor or glorify yourself. Not even because it's the good and right thing to do. **No, the primary reason you should serve as a deacon is because in so doing you're imitating Christ.** You're adopting his servant-like posture. You're conforming to the pattern he's already set.
 - ▶ **But remember, the gospel says Jesus came to not only set a pattern of humble service, but he came to serve us by laying down his own life as a ransom for ours.** In other religions, the primary message is, "*Serve God and you will be saved*". Offer these sacrifices. Give him this amount of time, service, and devotion, and you'll be in his good favor. But that's not Christianity. **The gospel says to stop trying to serve Jesus. To stop trying to work for him and admit you need him to serve you.** To ransom your life and reconcile you to God.
- ❖ And Paul is saying here in v13 that one of the surest ways to know you've been served by Jesus – that you're a Christian – is by living a life dedicated to deaconing in the name of Jesus. That's how you gain great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.
 - ▶ **That's why I think every believer should make this a goal – to strive to be a deacon (even in the specific sense) or at least to be the kind of person qualified to serve as one.** For those who serve well gain a good standing.