

Last week we spoke about the scriptural requirements for the office of elder, and this week we're looking at Paul's next focus, the deacons.

1 Timothy 3:8-16

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.

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. ¹⁶ Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (ESV)

One of the things we Americans so often do is read our bibles like they are some sort of technical manual. You know how this works: your toaster breaks, or a new light starts blinking on your dashboard. So you reach for the manual and skim through that troubleshooting chart in the back to find the answer to your trouble, and you're back in business. And in just that way, when something in your life, your church, your marriage or even the world breaks, we grab our bibles, turn to the concordance, and see if there is a verse that fixes whatever is wrong.

Now by God's grace, I've seen this work on occasion! But the bible is not a Christian owner's manual. It's not an operational handbook to tell you how God was made or even how you were made.

Look, people know, people who know their bible know, that if you want to understand what a deacon is, you turn to 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This is the *locus classicus*, **the** authoritative passage in the bible, on what a deacon is. But when you do that, when you turn to only these verses, you *miss* what a deacon is, at the same time! We'll try to read things differently this morning by looking at:

- The necessity of the deacon
- The requirements of the deacon
- The purpose of the deacon in the church

Some of you have heard me say this before, but since the steeple went up on this building, a byproduct has been more and more people popping into the church for help: seeing that there is a church right off the highway and that there is an exit right here. It's usually just asking for directions, but sometimes it's for spiritual things, even though they wouldn't say that. I have had people come in who have been without a job and wonder if they will work again. Or someone simply needs money. Not long ago, a guy came in who heard that his girlfriend was pregnant and he wanted to drive as far away as possible and never come back. That was a battle of the spirit.

Now since these folks are coming into a church, well I am going to *give* them the gospel. I am going to give them the truth. But, these people didn't come for a theological lecture... they came because they were looking for someone who *cares*.

One of the great problems of the church throughout the centuries, is that we never get these things exactly right. If you had to throw our church into a bucket, you'd say that theologically we are on the conservative side. And that means that if there's one problem we think we have covered, it's false teaching! We're never going to stand for that around here! We've got the truth.

But where is our ministry of tears? What does our conduct look like?

There are probably a few of you here who are *not* Christians. And the reason you refuse to be a Christian is that all you've ever heard from your Christian family or friends is the truth. The truth, the truth, and the truth. They've given you the truth with a capital T. And the truth is you ARE a sinner, and you DO need Jesus to be born again. And the truth hurts, doesn't it? No one likes to be called a sinner.

But it's also seemed to you like it's the truth without love. Sadly, it all seems so much like a mathematical formula to you. "Yes," you say, "I know I am a sinner. Okay. Big "minus sign" over my head. So I need to add the big "plus sign," Jesus, and then I will have more in my overall credit column. Okay. But what does that really have to do with how I am *feeling* and how I should live my life now?" What about love? And so the real reason you don't believe is you don't see anyone else cut to the heart. So you decide not to believe in Christianity.

On the other side, those churches that fall into the theologically liberal bucket, they have a ministry of tears. That is the focus. Social justice. They empathize with you and they seem to empathize with all of the good people you know, and the poor as well. But the problem there is that you don't really see lives changing – just a lot of people working hard to try and feel better about themselves. It's like the Peace Corps in ecclesiastical drag. It's love without the truth. There is no answer there that leads long-lasting change because there is so little truth.

But you see, neither of those ministries you may have observed are *real* Christianity. Biblical Christianity. Without a ministry of truth *and* tears, the pillar that is the church begins to crumble, and chunks start falling from the buttress. Truth and tears work together like a right and a left hand in the church.

And you see, last week we took some time to study the lengths to which Paul says we must have the truth to survive as God's light and his beacon to a world in utter need of rescue. If we don't have the truth, the church will not survive.

BUT, now Paul says, if that truth does not lead to a heart that says, "Serve!," "Care!," "Love!," then the church is not being the church. At best, it will only be an academic institution. With truth alone, it will not be a saving body of God's people. So Paul begins this section by saying "Likewise." "Deacons *likewise* must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine..." We have this whole other office in the church that says there must be leaders who are *diakonos*. Servants. Because that is the stated leadership role of a deacon.

EVERY Christian should be characterized by both truth and tears, word and service. And since we've just finished the membership class, let me throw out a promo for membership: I suspect this is true of us because it is a caricature of our denomination and sadly, perhaps all reformed Christians. You like this church because we take the word seriously, but you say, those Presbyterians are the frozen chosen. Doctrine without deeds. Always some truth to that. As long as we are a confessional church that says who we are, I suppose it looks like that because we will attract more of those who are inclined toward the truth. But if you want to stop with your critique and change that... to help us be more inclined toward a ministry of tears, well JOIN the church! We need both! So give us those gifts!

Deacons, then, are those who lead in this ministry of felt needs. Our deacons care not only for our facilities – the felt needs of our building so that we can care for those in need – but the felt needs of people. Those who HAVE need. And this is a tremendously high calling. Paul called himself a *diakonois* of the gospel – a servant of the gospel – and a *diakonois* of the new covenant. You can't talk about leadership in the church without using the word "servant." And that is why deacons – a group of leaders who order and organize the service we all need to be doing because of how Christ served us with his life – is so necessary.

Now second, the requirements of the deacons. I am not going to go over each and every requirement because there is a great deal of overlap with the elder. The character of the deacon must be very similar if not the same, as the elder. Deacons must be people of integrity.

But let's mention a few things.

First there is this strange command to which they must hold: "the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience."

Why is this mention of doctrine – the mysteries of the faith – right here? You know, the mysteries of the faith in the bible are things like God's sovereign work throughout history, that the mystery of the kingdom is that good and evil coexist until Christ returns in judgment, that God brings in the Gentiles, that we are saved not by works but by faith, and that Christ is the Messiah, the only redeemer of God's elect. All doctrinal stuff. Why mention this here when there is no mention of this for the elders?

Well, on the one hand, it's assumed for elders because for them it says they must be able to teach. But on the other hand it's because deacons tend to be doers. They get things done. In fact sometimes we elect people to be deacons that are such good doers, that they wonder why people can't just do what they do! Doesn't God help those who help themselves? But you see, deacons must NOT be "pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstrap," stoic kind of guys, with the old classic, puritan work ethic. Those deacons make a mockery of the name. Those deacons serve, but then expect every one to learn by watching them, and then figure it out for themselves. This is why Paul adds, "let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless." Paul wants deacons that have been tested. People who, when they have been brought to the ends of themselves. People who have tried everything to help themselves, and know that they can't – they need Jesus.

Jesus was tested, right? Jesus was tested in the wilderness. And his test was not to see if he was so tough and tough-minded that he could go those 40 days in some sort of stoic haze, in some sort of divinely ordained boot-camp and gut-check. No, the test was, would he live by every word that comes from the mouth of God? Did he live in faith, and was that faith upon the promises of God? Elders teach the gospel. But deacons work with the gospel, too! Deacons cannot just be amazing doers, but must *live out* the gospel! Truth AND tears. That's the test the deacons must go through – yes we train them, yes we make sure their doctrine is right, but when it comes down to it, are they serving in their own strength, or are they serving IN Christ? Is Christ their strength? V. 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."

Now next, we need to look at this word "likewise." Never has such a throwaway word received so much attention! Why? Because Paul described – we studied this last week, the Elders – and now he turns to Deacons by saying "likewise." And because of the likewise and because this word "deacon" is only known in a masculine form in the first century, it's always been thought that Paul is talking about men in verse 8. The NIV actually puts the word men in there: "deacons are likewise to be men worthy of respect." Verse 11 only confirms this by saying, Theirs wives, then, must be dignified..." But there is that word again: "likewise." *Likewise be dignified*. Is this a new office? Or not? This has confounded people. It still does! Our denomination is in a discussion of this very thing, and if you want to know where that discussion is, send me an email, and I will send you a link! But let me touch on it briefly. You need to know how your church is going about looking at this issue.

When you speak about the possibility of women being deacons, you're essentially looking at four passages – verse 11, here, and 1 Timothy 5:9ff, which we'll come to in a few weeks. And then Romans 16:1-2, Acts chapter 6. That is essentially it.

In Acts chapter 6, which most people agree is the text that outlines the proto-office of the deacon, was read earlier in the service. The title given to the seven there that are to wait the tables is not given. But the noun form of what they do and the verbal form of what they are doing, is "deaconing." Deacon the tables by deaconing. And what these seven were to do was to serve women. Serve widows. The elders – the 12 – couldn't get the job done by themselves. When I started here, we had only elders (though Ed and Roger and Ginny were doing just about everything back then, along with Janice and some others who helped me create the bulletin, and a few others that hate to be named.) But I answered the phone and spent about half my day getting rid of salesman that wanted to sell me communion cups, coffeemakers, emergent church candles and PowerPoint wall projectors. But as we grew, I couldn't handle it all. Suddenly, no time for prayer. Less time to study God's word.

The same thing happened back then. And so the 12 put out the command to the brothers to pick out from among themselves seven *men* of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty."

The point here is that everyone who was chosen to do this ministry by apostolic direction (by the 12) – specifically to widows – were to be men (the word *andras* – the adult male – not the generic *anthropos*). And if ever there was an occasion that called for women to serve as deacons to needy women, this is probably the place. Dr. Ligon Duncan, a pastor and professor in our denomination, says that "there is a world of theology and pastoral care in that divinely sanctioned command. God will not allow the male leadership of the church to be unconcerned about or uninvolved in ministering to the direst needs of their sisters in Christ – they cannot delegate away that responsibility. He intends to minister to them with godly men.

And if Paul wanted to indicate that the women here in 1st Timothy are women deacons, he could have done that. This would be the place. There may not have been a word for "deaconess" yet, but that would not have stopped Paul from coining one, like *diakonissa*, which came along in the 4th century. So these are *wives* of deacons. It's the same word Paul used earlier on to say that "women should dress modestly." And so the ESV assumes we are talking about the wives of these deacons.

But here is the question we have to wrestle with in our text: Why... *WHY* would Paul give a selection criteria given for the wives of deacons, and not the elder's wives? So you have elders who are supposed to be the husband of but one wife, but there are no *selection criteria* for *them*? "Elders can be elders no matter who or what their wives are, but deacons...we better look at who their wives are...?" Why aren't the elder's wives screened "likewise?" Should there not be even *higher* standards for *them*?

One answer is that the women were doing service alongside their husbands in ways that elder's wives did not elder alongside *their* husbands in *their* work. And if you have ever been a deacon, this has been exactly the case. When your ministry is one of service to felt needs, it always involves your spouse. There will always be a need for more hands.

And let me say this. Here is what the bible DOES say: the bible in a consistent, ongoing, unflinching way makes the case for women being publically recognized for serving – for deaconing. Any diaconate that does not have women involved and doing so in a way we can name and recognize them – for instance, Shary Sadowski is leading a ministry of hospitality now in our church – any diaconate that does not recognize her is not functioning as a biblical diaconate! If she is not authorized or recognized, she simply is not going to be very effective. Any church that only has men leading, and no women leading anything, is just a really bad church. Have you noticed that? Why? Because they refuse to use and glorify all the gifts of the body.

Where is your denomination going? I can't say exactly. But here is what I can say we are trying to do. We are trying to be very self-aware about what is pushing us and driving us on this issue – and that goes for people on both sides of the argument.¹ Are we going to be pushed on this question because of a sense that our churches are getting it, in practice, biblically wrong?

¹ This church has a tradition of being biblically VERY conservative, but having come from a denomination that fed into the PCA, we were one of the groups that DID have deaconesses, as 10th Presbyterian does right now. But others of our churches come from other perspectives.

Or, are we going to be pushed by an internal dissatisfaction on the part of some segment of our female members? Or, because of apologetic concerns with our engagement with a dominant egalitarian culture – in other words, we want to win over the world to Christ and so we must be like them to be understood, and drop our complementarian views. Or because of a biblical conviction that we're not following the scriptures?

If we are concessive on any non-biblical grounds – that if we don't ordain women deacons in a dominant egalitarian culture, the game – the truth – is over. Well, will you then ordain, elders and pastors that are female? And if you're not going to ordain openly gay people, it's no accommodation to say you ordain openly female deacons!

As Dr. Duncan says, the world doesn't really care one wit about our doctrine. They really don't! They don't care about it as long as you don't expect them to believe it. When was the last time a college professor or a neighbor or a relative asked you what you think of the end times, or about sanctification? They don't! They only care about your ethics. "Tell me, is your denomination gay affirming?" You see, the way they will get to your doctrine is through your ethics. So we are very self-consciously biblical about our gender ethics. And so we have this discussion within a bold proclamation of our denomination's complementarian views. We are all co-workers of the gospel! So you will see, likewise(!), women doing all sorts of things in this church, often goading the men to do what needs to be done... but let's get it done.

Now finally, the purpose of the deacon in the church.

I said up front that often when you read a passage of the bible – you turn here, for instance to find out what deacons are – you can miss the entire meaning of the passage. No, you have to let the bible speak to you in its own way. You have to let it have its way with you. This is not easy to do – especially if something in your life HAS broken down and you want answers fast.

In this letter, Paul tells you in the *middle* of the letter why he's written it. Not in the end section. It's not in the beginning. In the beginning *and* the end, you find out about the *setting*, the *backdrop*, the *cause* of the letter: it's these false teachers.

But the purpose is right here in the middle: "I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." We mustn't just cut the description of the deacon's job qualifications off from the sole purpose of the letter, ESPECIALLY when that purpose is in the very next verse!

So there you have it. The church is a household. It's the household, though, of *the living God*. And that household is itself a pillar, a buttress of truth. All truth hangs on the church. But inside that household, one has to behave a certain way, or truth the truth will be lost. "And so," Paul says, "here is how to behave."

And how DO things work in the household of God? Well, we know best by looking at the one who set up and announced the kingdom. Jesus used this word *diakonos* on a number of occasions. And in every case he used it to teach his radical ideal of human relationships as those involving self-sacrifice. And this was radical then, and it's radical now. Today, the ideal relationship is when both people are fulfilled. Both people are satisfied. And when that satisfaction goes away, then you can walk away. But Jesus turns these me-first, my fulfillment is primary relationships upside down. He says, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant (deacon), and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served (deaconed) but to serve (to deacon), and to give his life as a ransom for many."

And later on, in the upper room, he says, "For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves (deacons)? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves (deacons)."

This is the truth and the conduct of that truth! If you are looking for Christ, where will you find him? At the top of the culture, or the bottom? We you find him in the front of the line, or the back? Will you find him with the rich and satisfied, or the poor and needy?

You find him where you find the servant! That's the truth of the gospel! You don't find him on a throne because his throne is a cross! This is what we confess! And you see, it's these two things going together – confession and conduct – that will always be unique to the church. Confession of the truth and the character of your conduct. Truth and tears.

And until we get that – until we understand ourselves as servants in and to the world – the world will not understand the gospel.

If we are going to say poverty is wrong (that's the truth – it IS wrong), then we also have to feed the poor.

If we are going to say abortion is wrong (it is wrong), then we are going to have to start adopting the orphans.

If we are going to say that gay marriage is wrong, we are going to have to start by loving the gay friend and neighbor.

Truth AND tears. Confession AND a confessional conduct.

I'm an elder in this church. I am supposed to proclaim truth. Let me ask you something. If I spend my days speaking truth to power on all of the social issues of the day, what kind of impact will I have? How many minds will I change? But let's say I am a Christian who is a secretary to corporate president, or a janitor who cleans the oval office, or a shoeshine boy who serves the CEO of a corporation, or an assistant to a great surgeon. And after serving for a number of years, I desire to speak to that person about some very important things. Eternal things... what kind of impact will I have then?

Enormous. Because they've seen my heart. They know I am genuine. They know I care and I have seen their worst – I've seen their garbage, the bottoms of their feet, the way they talk in private.

And that's just it – the world isn't going to really listen to the truth of the gospel unless they see us serving the gospel.

Let's pray.