

## 1 Timothy 3:8-13

So far we have explored the qualifications for elders in verses 1-7; now, in verses 8-13, Paul ups the ante when he sets out a series of guidelines for choosing deacons.

We're not talking here about finding the lowest common denominator when we appoint folks to such a vitally important role; it's not the kind of job that any Tom, Dick, or Harry can fulfil – like those who are overseers, we're on the lookout for quality people, those individuals who exemplify the character of Jesus. When it comes to ministry, nothing but the best will do! God is principally looking for people, willing to stand in the gap, and be his hands and feet in the church.

A deacon's role is significantly different to that of an elder – one has prime responsibility for the spiritual oversight in the local church, whilst the deacon is more concerned with looking after temporal affairs. That is not to diminish their job spec at all, for all work done in the context of the local church is seen as a valuable spiritual ministry. One may be upfront, the other behind the scenes, but none can be done without.

The word deacon comes from the Greek word diakonos, which means 'servant', i.e. someone who ministers to and cares for others. The list of credentials outlined in these verses serves to massively enhance the office and profile of a deacon – they get right to the heart of the Christian gospel, for we're here to serve one another. They are to be chosen carefully according to their character, not randomly recruited.

Paul's inclusion of the word 'likewise' in verse 8 underlines the fact that deacons are not a kind of second-class elder. They are not intended to be seen as also-rans, as those who haven't quite got it to become elders; Paul is definitely not referring here to a spiritual pecking order. Not at all! These folks are not inferior in any sense – they are God's servants.

The major difference in the two groups is that elders are men with the ability to teach biblical truth; apart from that, there is not a cat's whisker between them. So, let's pursue Paul's list and see what info we can glean from it.

As before, personal character is top of the agenda – what a man is when the light's are turned off is hugely important. They are to be 'men worthy of respect', i.e. men of dignity. People we look up to. A deacon should take his responsibilities seriously and use the office, not just fill it.

These folks should be the Real McCoy in mind, as well as in character. We're looking here for the genuine article, not a make-believe kind of believer. There is something attractive in their lifestyle that draws people to them, they have a magnetic pull about their personality. People respect and appreciate all that they are – there is no contradiction between what they say and what they do. John MacArthur makes the point that a deacon 'must not be a silly, flippant person, one who makes light of serious matters. Although not a cold, joyless person, a deacon understands the seriousness of life.' We're talking here about individuals who are earthed to reality, people who have both feet on the ground and have a handle on life. They are not superficial, or silly, or shallow – they have depth.

The word 'sincere' has the idea of integrity – someone who is not double tongued or two-faced; we could even say he should not be fork tongued like the old devil himself. You see, what a man says is mega important – one tongue is enough for any one to handle, when two tongues are wagging from the same person it's all a bit over the top.

Someone who says one thing to one person and then something different to another person is not deacon material. We have to trust these folks, so they have to be men of their word. A man who tells different stories to different people will quickly lose the confidence of church members – in so doing, he manifests a duplicitous and manipulative motive. A deacon's speech must,

therefore, not be hypocritical, but be characterised by honesty, integrity, and consistency. You can depend on what he says for his word is his bond. Such a person can also keep a confidence – people can confide in him and know it won't go any further. A deacon must have enough discernment to know what to keep and what to share. Like the elder, a deacon is banned from 'indulging in much wine'. In other words, he's not to become addicted to alcohol; he is not to be preoccupied with booze, nor should he allow it to influence his life or dictate his thinking. Again, the Lord is looking for people who are able to make decisions with a clear mind, not a mind that is blurred and fuzzy because of drinking the devil's beer.

The last item in verse 8 tells us that a deacon is not to pursue 'dishonest gain'. Put simply, he's not in the job to make a few bucks at other people's expense. He's not there to get a nice wee earner on the sideline. When it comes to finance, this man must be above board at all times; no one should be able to point the finger of suspicion at him.

Reason – well, these guys would handle a lot of money in the course of an average week – they would distribute money to widows, orphans, and others in need. The temptation would always be there to steal from the funds, as Judas did in John 12. That's why it is imperative for deacons to be free from any love of money that could compromise their honesty.

We'll pause for a short music break, when we come back we'll take a look at the deacon's spiritual life in verse 9.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

I love the way Paul speaks of embracing the truth in verse 9 – he's a man of the Book himself, so he expects nothing less from those who serve the Lord in the local church. He writes that a deacon 'must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.' Those in any kind of leadership are expected to be men who have a good grasp of biblical truth, they should have a working knowledge of the doctrines of the faith. Sure, they may not understand it all,

and that's ok ... but they need to know what they believe and be able to stand foursquare upon it.

When Paul speaks of the deacon having a 'clear conscience' he is reminding them of the need to walk close with the Lord; they must not be living double lives, as it were. When they are up to their neck in truth, and knee deep in grace, they'll not have a problem with their conscience.

The conscience is that God given, built-in radar system – it tells us when we haven't done right or when we have done wrong. A man who knows the deep truths of the word of God will have a soft and sensitive conscience. When he steps out of line with Scripture, the alarm bells will start ringing immediately – he'll be aware of the shortfall in his life and, with God's help, will do something about it. If he doesn't, the devil will give him a rough ride and accuse him from dawn to dusk.

Paul makes an interesting point in verse 10 when he notes that a deacon 'must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against [him], let [him] serve as [a deacon].' The verb 'tested' is in the present tense, that indicates it's not a one-off test, like a kind of two-hour examination – it's an ongoing process.

Pressures are inevitable in such a role and when they come, the true person is often seen. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't! We are like saturated sponges ... if we apply pressure to a sponge, we immediately see what fills it. The pressures of their ministry would reveal what they are made of! Hence the need for evaluation.

There's nothing unusual about this – quite a few leaders spoken of in the Bible were first tested as servants. Joseph was down in Egypt for 13 years before he became second ruler in the land – Moses cared for sheep for 40 years before God called him – Joshua was Moses' servant before he became his successor – David was tending his father's sheep when Samuel invited him to be anointed king of Israel. Even our Lord Jesus came as a servant and laboured as a carpenter, and Paul himself was a tent maker!

It seems that the test in view here is the general assessment of a believer's service by the church. They are to be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis; if they aren't delivering the goods and are consistently missing the grade, they should be asked to step down; if their performance is outstanding and marked by excellence, they should be given the opportunity to continue serving on the diaconate.

Such a process is not meant to be intimidating, it's not there to threaten those involved – it's more like a carrot, for it should bring out the best in them. It should give them a real incentive to pull out all the stops – accountability is important in the local church environment.

All too often we have the attitude that says 'it's for the church, anything will do'; well, according to Paul, if we are serving each other and serving the Lord, then we have no option but to give it our very best shot all the time.

When it comes to moral purity, the standard for deacons is akin to that for elders – we read in verse 12 that 'a deacon must be the husband of but one wife'. Same turn of phrase as we have up the chapter in verse 2 – it means the deacon will be a one-woman-man. He must not be unfaithful to his wife in any way or at any time – his conduct in private, and in public, is beyond reproach.

No other woman can have his affections martially, mentally, or emotionally. His wife ought to occupy his full horizon. He must love her as he loves himself. As John Piper says: 'He must pursue his own joy in the holy joy of his wife.' He rejects as treachery anything that would alter his loving focus. A one-wife man places his wife at the centre of his heart.

He's not a womaniser in the church or community – the issue here is moral character, someone who can always be trusted in the presence of the opposite sex. A deacon is to be a paragon of virtue at all times, a model of sexual purity.

His home life is under further scrutiny for he 'must manage his children and his household well.' They ought to be up for it, and on

top of it, when it comes to running their home and its related responsibilities – their immediate family must be under their thumb and they should have their finger on the pulse of household matters. For those men who are married, here's the bottom line, if they can't carry out the duties of a husband and a father, then there's no way they'll be able to carry the workload of a deacon – a change of environment doesn't necessarily turn a failure into an overnight success story. There's always room for improvement but churches can't afford to take that risk!

I think we'll take a break there; when we return in a minute or two, I want us to look at verse 11 where Paul zooms in on the role of women deacons.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

An interesting verse is verse 11, and it has to be said, one that has caused a bit of a stir down the years – it all depends how you see it. Is Paul talking about the wife of a deacon, or is he referring to female deacons? We read in the NIV translation: 'In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.'

If you're reading from the NIV, you will see a footnote at the bottom of the page – for 'women' it substitutes the word with 'deaconesses'. To be honest with you, I'm inclined to agree with them. That means, when it comes to the diaconate, there is no issue of gender – men and women are eligible to serve so long as they meet the biblical criteria; that said, let me reinforce what I said yesterday, it's different for an elder – that position is strictly limited to men.

Paul's use of the phrase 'in the same way' would suggest that he is about to introduce a third group – he did the same when he spoke of deacons for the first time in verse 8. It's also very interesting to note that there are no qualifications laid down for elders' wives, that begs the question, if he didn't do it for them, why would he change tack and do it for deacons? That flies in the face of spiritual logic!

Their qualifications match those of their male colleagues – they are not given an easier ride. They are to be ‘worthy of respect’ in their chosen lifestyle – Joe Public will admire them because of the quality of their relationship with the Lord; they are truly serious in their commitment to Christ and his church; they are sold out in their surrender and devotion to Jesus.

They have the glow of God on their lives, there’s something radiant in all their dealings with others; their lives shine in the midst of inky black darkness. There is nothing about them that is dubious and unsavoury – she is the kind of woman whom Will Rogers described as ‘not afraid to sell the family parrot to the town gossip!’

They are not to be ‘malicious talkers’ – that’s a tough phrase, but it’s an essential one. They must control their tongues and be extremely careful what they say; if they don’t, they will be nothing more than the devil’s mouthpiece. So much irreparable damage is done when leaders don’t think before they talk – key ministries can be destroyed and lives scarred all because people engage in gossip or embellished conversation.

Like the men, they are expected to be ‘temperate’ – again, they are not to be addicted to alcohol. You’ll not find these folks in the pub on a Saturday night getting stupid drunk. They will be mega careful in what they do, because people are watching. At all times, they will be aware of their responsibilities – they will be sober and level-headed.

Finally, they are to be ‘trustworthy in everything’. These folks will have a reputation, they should ensure it’s a good one. The fact is they will be working with people and handling all kinds of challenging situations, they will be involved with finances, therefore, they must be people-friendly and women of integrity. There should be no blots or blemishes on their character. Paul isn’t looking for perfection, but he is aiming for excellence and reliability and dependability.

There is a word of enormous encouragement in verse 13 where Paul informs us: 'Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.'

The first reward is one that we don't necessarily expect or even anticipate – the word refers to an elevated stand. Here it is used metaphorically to speak of those who are a step above everyone else. In our lingo, we might say they are put on a pedestal. It's worth noting, that is not sinful pride; the fact is, deacons do not seek it, yet are worthy of it. Those who serve in humility will be exalted by God – that's the drift of James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:6. Men will often put us down, God lifts us up!

The second bonus is one of confidence in our faith – successful service breeds a healthy, holy confidence – it also gives a level of assurance among the people served. Those who serve God well, and see his power and grace operative in their lives, will be emboldened for even greater service. In other words, as we joyfully serve God and his church, the Lord will give us a sense of release – he will free us up and we will be unshackled in our ministry. That's a tremendous blessing!

Let me say in closing – you're maybe not an elder, you're not even a deacon ... well, don't panic, don't worry – you have so much to contribute, you can make a huge difference. You can serve the Lord and serve his people without having a name tag on your lapel – the question is: are you serving today?