

Deacons

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, I pray once again that your spirit would help us illuminate our minds so that we can know what you are saying to us through your word, and especially as we think about deacons today and how they enable us as a whole, as a church, to serve you wholeheartedly.

So please be with us this morning. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Now what do you think is more important in church life? Faith or good deeds?

Word or works? Now to help me sort out this question, one of the people I find most helpful is a man named Leslie Neubijin. Neubijin served as a missionary to India for many years, before eventually becoming a bishop and a scholar.

And one of the ways he describes the church is as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom. Now what do signs do?

They have one purpose, to grab your attention and point you somewhere. So they communicate to you where the toilets are or where your airport gate is.

[1 : 2 5] If the sign only calls attention to itself, how beautiful it is, how pretty the fonts are, then it's failed in its basic task.

And the church is meant to be a gigantic sign that communicates and points you to Jesus. And the church is also meant to be a foretaste.

Think again about all those supermarket promoters at Takyong, giving you all those little cups of whatever the latest craze is, maybe durian-flavored Milo or something like that. They're giving you this little taste in the hope that you would love it so much that you want to buy the entire package.

And so church life, ideally, is meant to give us a foretaste of what it's like to be in God's kingdom so much that we want more.

And if we think like that, then I think we know the answer to the question I asked at the beginning. Which is more important in church life?

[2 : 3 3] It's both. We can't choose between word and works. We need both for the church to truly be a sign and foretaste of the kingdom.

We're not meant to sharply separate the two. Just imagine if we fill our heads with lots of information from the Bible about loving one another, but we never did anything about it.

If so, then as James tells us from last year, in James 2, verse 17, it should be on the screen, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

It's empty faith. Forced faith. Similarly, the Apostle John, in 1 John 3, verse 17 to 18, says this, So it's pretty clear action is important.

But, on the other hand, just imagine if we were all about doing good, but we never ever connected it back to Jesus. Then we are no different from the many charities that are along Jalan Ong Tiang Sui.

[4 : 06] We've not fulfilled our purpose. We will be like the sign pointing to itself. But, how can we ensure that word and action, proclamation and demonstration, are held together in church life?

How can we make sure that one is not sidelined? And that's where the deacons come in. This morning, we're continuing our mini-series in elders, deacons, and God's household.

Last week, we began by having a look at what kind of people should be elders from 1 Timothy chapter 3. And we saw that, essentially, they must both teach and exemplify godliness.

And this week, we'll keep looking through 1 Timothy 3 to see what kind of people should be deacons. But before we do that, let's clarify the role of a deacon.

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul simply assumes that we know, and he doesn't unpack it for us. And indeed, the New Testament as a whole actually doesn't give us that much information regarding what deacons are to do.

[5 : 31] Perhaps that's partly because the word deacon itself simply means service. And of course, all Christians are called to serve in a wide variety of ways, whether they hold a certain position or not.

And yet, just like with the elders, God does cause some people to be set aside specifically for this office.

And although the New Testament doesn't give us all that much information, there does seem to be one passage that gives us a big clue as to what they do.

And that's the one we also had read this morning, Acts chapter 6, verse 1 to 7. So before we turn to 1 Timothy, chapter 3, I ask you to turn with me to Acts chapter 6 for a moment.

And let me just describe to you what's happening there. So turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Acts that's between the book of John and the book of Romans and to chapter 6. So let me describe what's happening there.

[6 : 38] Notice, first of all, how things are going for the church, verse 1. In those days, the numbers of the disciples was increasing.

And so it's a time of great excitement. people are coming to know Jesus, the numbers are going up, the church hall is overflowing, and indeed, folks from different backgrounds are becoming Christians.

Verse 1 mentions that there are Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews who believe. But now, there's a threat and it comes from within.

Verse 1 again. The Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now, Hellenistic Jews were the Greek-speaking Jews. They probably grew up overseas before returning to the land of Israel. They're the bananas of their day, if you like.

[7 : 46] And the Hebraic Jews were those of Palestinian origin and the ones who spoke primarily Aramae, the local dialect. To use a modern-day parallel, just imagine that there are two groups of people in your church.

One group who speaks Mandarin at home, went to Chinese school all their lives, did uni locally, and watched mainly Hong Kong TV serials.

And then there's another group that went to kebangsaan schools, studied in places like Melbourne and London, and who are more interested in Scarlett Johansson than Sammy Chang.

So that's roughly what we have here. But the Hellenistic Jews were unhappy. They thought their widows were being neglected.

Perhaps, without saying it outright, they thought that there was a hint of favouritism going on. Why is it the Hebraic women seem to be better looked after?

[8 : 52] That's the question behind the question. Now, whether or not that was really the case, or whether it was simply an accidental oversight, is hard to tell.

Perhaps, there was a grain of truth in the accusation. But the point is, regardless of how much was perception and how much was reality, we now have an internal threat.

The church was in danger of having a very serious conflict. And it could lead to them splitting and thus undoing all the good work that has been done so far.

So what's the solution? notice what the apostles do in verses 2 to 4. So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

[10 : 12] So in essence, they do two things. The first thing they did, interestingly, was to reaffirm their commitment to gospel ministry.

We need to stay focused on the preaching of the word and prayer, they said. We can't be distracted by becoming personally involved in caring for those widows who are in need.

Well, that was how seriously they took the ministry of the word and prayer. It was so important that even the plight of the widows could not take them away from doing this.

And in doing so, they were actually following the example of Jesus, who sometimes stepped away from places where people were expecting him to heal so that he could teach.

But they didn't stop there. They didn't just say, preaching the word is primary, therefore everything else is unimportant. No.

[11 : 27] they knew that these widows must be cared for. And so the second thing they did was to carefully select seven men for the task of serving these widows.

They made sure that the church had word and works. And you know that the apostles don't think of this as just a second-class job, because they didn't just choose anybody.

In verse three, they wanted men known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. They wanted qualified people.

They wanted it to be known that this was also a key role. Deacons don't play a lesser part in God's church. They simply play a different part.

And so they choose these men, lay hands on them, and in God's grace, the church was protected. Notice in verse seven what happened after that.

[12 : 35] The word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

The widows were looked after, while the work of the gospel was not derailed. And so from this episode, I think we can now begin to flash three key aspects of a deacon's ministry.

I should just say that I borrowed these headings from a book by Mark Dever called Understanding Church Leadership, which I thought captured it extremely well. So what are these three key aspects?

Number one, deacons are to care for the physical needs of the church. That's probably the most obvious point. This man made sure that the widows in the church were not neglected, but cared for.

Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that these seven men took care of all the widows personally. This was a large and growing church. What they probably did was to organize and to facilitate the work of other church members to make sure that no one got left behind.

- [13 : 55] They prepared rosters. They worked out what needed doing. They mobilized people. And so in modern day terms, perhaps today, a deacon might notice that in his congregation at this particular time, there's a big group of people with long term illnesses whose families need help.

And so they might enlist other Christians in the congregation and prepare a roster and spread the load so that various people are bringing them food or helping to fetch the children or just come and visit and be an encouraging presence from time to time.

But why? Why do all this? You see, it's easy to see all this and conclude that deacons mainly do charity work.

But that's not quite accurate biblically speaking. There's something deeper that they're doing. You see, actually, they are helping us as a church to obey the command of Jesus to love one another.

they're helping us to be obedient to the instructions of James and John to accompany faith with works.

- [15 : 24] And they lead the way and they coordinate things so that love and mercy can be seen concretely in our congregation and everyone gets to play a part.

All Christians are to do ministry, not just elders and deacons. Every church member serves. But the deacons in particular help facilitate the ministry of every member.

They organize love in church, to put it one way. And when that happens, the church is better able to be assigned to the kingdom and the king.

And that's one big reason God has ordained the office of deacons to enable the church to be what it's meant to be.

Number two, deacons are to work for unity in the body. So when we look at Acts chapter 6, we notice that the deacons were not simply there to smoothen out the food distribution amongst the widows, as if it was primarily an administrative problem.

- [16 : 43] No, they had a bigger purpose beyond that. They served practically to ensure spiritual disharmony did not come to the church body.

The apostles were called in because they realized that the church's unity was in danger with the possibility of it splintering along cultural lines. And so they made sure they were people who were at hand, who do what is needed to resolve the situation, to prevent an unnecessary split.

And so this, you can see, isn't about doctrine. But sometimes situations can easily develop and be blown out of proportion in the church, can't they?

So let's say, for example, that things are not being fixed properly or being arranged properly in the church crash. And perhaps no one is taking responsibility for how the crash is being cleaned after use.

And if this situation persists, you know, the crash is forever disorganized and dirty and so on, and it could begin to create unhappiness and grumbling and blame shifting.

- [17 : 56] So someone is unhappy because he or she thinks that, oh, that particular group, they don't keep the toys in the proper way. And then another group thinks, oh, but that other person is so strict.

And so you have a situation where people are unhappy and it helps no one's godliness. But if someone came in to resolve the situation by getting everyone to agree on some ground rules, perhaps to arrange a roster and a cleaner, and so on, do what is needed, well, what that deacon is doing is not just something practical.

the person is actually ensuring that unity is kept in the body. They might be engaging in something that we call administrative, but actually, their primary goal is to build the body and to keep the bond of love.

And once again, they're helping the church to actually love one another and have each other's interests in mind. Number three, deacons are to support the ministry of the word.

And that's clear from Acts 6 as well. They serve by freeing up the pastor teachers to concentrate on his main job. And they serve by looking to enhance the ministry of the word and prayer.

[19 : 25] They make sure, once again, that the church has works and the word. Think perhaps of those who are responsible for the sound system today.

They might use their technical know-how to ensure that the acoustics of this church hall is the best that it could possibly be, so that the word of God is clearly heard by all.

Or think again of those involved in logistics who perhaps drive the church van to make sure that college students can come along to Sunday service or perhaps to Bible study.

Now, these are all support ministries to the ministry of the word and prayer. And deacons take on these kinds of responsibility.

In this way, word and works are able to flourish together in a church. So, as you can see, the ministry of the deacon can be wide and varied.

[20 : 32] We mustn't think of the deacon positions that are currently listed at the back of our bulletin as the only kind of deacon ministries available.

They are not fixed. At some churches, there might even be a deacon for the library or a deacon for parking or a deacon for IT. There's flexibility.

Just because a deacon position exists for a certain area now doesn't mean that it has to exist for all time. And just because there isn't a deacon position for another area doesn't mean that it doesn't come into play.

The question is, what ministries help us to fulfill our call to practical love? Does it help to keep unity in the body?

And does it truly support the ministry of the word and prayer? And so we can adjust accordingly as we see what is needed and what is now obsolete.

[21 : 38] And what a blessing it is for the church when we properly identify areas of need and have deacons who are absolutely committed to fulfilling their purposes.

And let me just take this opportunity now to also say thank you to all our deacons who try their very best. But what kind of people does God want serving as deacons?

Well, that brings us now back to 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 8 to 13. And I hope that as we scan through this list, I hope that you're struck once again by what God is interested in.

He's primarily interested in godliness and character, not skills per se. Like elders, deacons should model godliness.

that's what God's looking for. So let me try once again to summarize these characteristics as I did with the elders last week. Firstly, deacons have integrity.

[22 : 52] Deacons have integrity. In verse 8, they are to be worthy of respect. They are people whom you notice for the right reasons rather than the wrong ones.

They are people whom you will be happy to consider role models. Now this is seen in a number of ways. They must be, verse 8 again, sincere.

Actually, the NIV here doesn't capture the more specific term. The ESV, more precisely, says that they are not to be double-tongued.

In other words, they are not to be people who say one thing to one person and a completely different thing to another person. After all, cast your mind back to the situation in Acts 6.

Both groups would certainly want someone who would deal with their grievances with integrity, wouldn't they? It would make things even worse if the deacon was someone whose word they couldn't trust.

[24 : 01] This is confirmed for us down in verse 11. You can see that they are not to be malicious talkers or slanderers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

Now let me just quickly deal here with a side issue that might be a bit confusing for some of you. In verse 11, if you have the older NIV or the ESV in front of you, it seems as if Paul is now addressing the wives of deacons rather than the deacons themselves.

But in New Testament Greek, there is actually no word for husband and wife, just man and woman. So it's translated husband and wife in our Bibles when it's clear that the context demands it, as in Ephesians chapter 5, for example.

But here, it's not so clear-cut, which is why the NIV 2011 translates the verse as the women. And then they give you a footnote to tell you that it could either mean deacon's wives or women who are deacons.

And although it's difficult to choose, I think it is slightly more likely to refer to women who are deacons rather than deacon's wives. I'll just quickly give you three reasons why I think so.

[25 : 25] Firstly, notice that verses 8 and 11 start identically. In verse 8, it says, in the same way, deacons, and then down in verse 11, in the same way, women.

So that seems to indicate that the office of deacon is still being referred to. Secondly, it seems strange that Paul would have the wives of deacons meet certain qualifications, but not the wives of elders.

And thirdly, and this is a supplementary reason rather than a main one, church history shows that there were certainly women who served as deacons in the early church.

So a letter from Pliny the Younger, who is a Roman governor, indicates that he once questioned two Christian women whom he calls deacons. So I take it that the characteristics mentioned in verse 11 are still referring to those who become deacons.

Although I accept a different church might come to a different conclusion, and I respect their take. Now, sorry to have to take that side route, but it's necessary just to clear up any confusion.

[26 : 39] But let's get back to our main point, which is that deacons are to have integrity. So they have integrity in the way that they speak, they have integrity, end of verse 8, in their usage of alcohol, and in the way they handle money.

And we touched on some of these characteristics last week as well. that's the kind of deacon you want. Secondly, deacons exhibit faithfulness.

Deacons exhibit faithfulness. They exhibit faithfulness in a few ways. Let's look at them. Verse 9, they must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

In other words, just because a deacon seems to be involved in mainly practical matters, does not mean that they don't need to have a good grasp of the Bible.

In Acts chapter 6, Stephen is appointed as one of the seven men. In Acts chapter 7, he delivers an amazing speech which shows that he has a profound knowledge of the scriptures.

[27 : 59] And so he's one of those looking after the widows, and yet he's no slouch theologically. And so deacons are not merely those who sit in meetings and decide matters.

They are those who have a good biblical framework from which they base their decisions. The veteran pastor Warren Rearsby, who just went to be with the Lord last week, once said this, I have noticed that some church officers know their church constitutions better than they know the word of God.

While it is good to have bylaws and regulations to help maintain order, it is important to manage the affairs of the church on the basis of the word of God. The scriptures were the constitution of the early church.

A deacon who does not know the Bible is an obstacle to progress in a local assembly. And so that means when we choose deacons, we don't simply look for people who seem to be very competent in a practical area like finances.

We want to check that they understand the gospel and that they know at least the basics. So we don't just pick people to pluck holes that will actually cause more problems in the long run.

[29 : 22] And deacons should endeavour to keep growing in the word. Notice in verse 9 it says that they keep whole of the faith. They are constantly hanging on to it and feeding of it.

And that's why at Leadership Retreat this year I encourage our elders and deacons to read at least two books one on godliness but also one on doctrine to grow in that area.

I've given them a recommended reading list. And so to our elders and deacons this is just a gentle reminder to you not to forget your homework. But faithfulness is also shown in their home life.

Verse 12 A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. As with elders they are to be committed to their marriage and to trying their best to bring up the family in God's ways.

And verse 13 they are above all faithful in service. And that is really at the heart of the deacon's office. They are those who have served well.

[30 : 40] They spur us on by their example. And actually God says when they do they grow themselves in their confidence of Jesus. Perhaps because they need to keep relying on him.

And so that's a great side benefit actually. As you serve you grow spiritually. And so verse 10 that's probably why deacons ought to be tested first.

Often it's the case that the people who are qualified to be deacons are those already serving whether in an official capacity or not. Occasionally we might think this way.

Ah, so and so is a great lawyer. He has the right skill set to be deacon of X. He's got great potential. But when you look at him the person has shown no interest at all in serving in the church.

Well if so then he doesn't have as much potential as we might think. Rather the best candidates are those we already know quietly serving behind the scenes cleaning up the library looking to encourage that person standing alone at the refreshments table later on or who volunteer for kids club without much fanfare.

[32 : 02] And so here are some questions we could ask as we think about deacons. Does the deacon have a good reputation for keeping his word? Do they follow through on what they say?

Do they speak truth in growing spiritually? Are they not only turning up at the Gautong Royong but also the Bible study?

Are they already serving in church even if it's not in an official capacity? God And so I hope that today's sermon helps us to clarify what role the deacon plays and what sort of deacons we should be looking for.

In summary, deacons play a different but no less important role to elders. They are those who look after the physical needs of the church, work for unity in the body, and support the ministry of the word to free up the ministers of the word.

They spur us on as a church to love each other better and ensure as a church that our faith is evidence in works. They have integrity and exhibit faithfulness.

[33 : 22] Above all, they are models of service. And so let's pray for these kind of deacons. And if we're deacons ourselves, let's aspire to be this kind of deacon.

For again, verse 13, those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

But as we finish, let's look again to Jesus. For Jesus is the ultimate deacon. As Mark 10, 45 reminds us, for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve or deacon and to give his life as a ransom for many.

For he is the ultimate model of service. Without his act of sacrificial service, there's no way we could ever qualify. So praise God for Jesus and now as his followers, we follow in his footsteps.

And as we serve the body of Christ, we are ultimately serving him. Let's pray. Father, praise you again for the many people in our church who serve, seen and unseen, whether as deacons or in some other capacity or perhaps without any official position.

[35 : 01] We thank you so much for each and every one of them. And Father, will you continue to grow us as a church, to be a church that has both words and works to see our faith evidence in action.

And may you provide us with deacons who will be able to help us facilitate that kind of ministry so that indeed the whole world can see and know that Jesus Christ is Lord.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.