



That hymn we just sang (*Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*) was written by the 18<sup>th</sup> century English minister Charles Wesley, the youngest son and 18th child of Samuel and Susannah Wesley. Charles loved to communicate the gospel through hymns, so much so that he wrote 6,500 of them during his lifetime (4500 of which were published). Some of his other well-known hymns include “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing,” “And Can It Be,” and “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today.”

Charles Wesley, like King David, “the sweet psalmist of Israel” (2 Sam. 23:1), “served the purpose of God in his own generation” (Acts 13:36). That’s what each of us are called to do, and in Christ we have our perfect example. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

All Christians are called to serve, but some are called to do so in a more official capacity. They’re called deacons, and their qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (p. 933).

<sup>8</sup> Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup> They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup> And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup> Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup> Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup> 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.

- 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Last week we considered the qualifications for overseers (1 Tim. 3:1), a term that is interchangeable with “pastor” and “elder” in the New Testament. After listing the overseer’s qualifications in verses 1-7, Paul transitions to the qualifications of deacons with the use of the word “likewise” in verse 8. “Deacons likewise must be dignified ... they [must] prove themselves blameless....”

Before surveying the qualifications for deacons, we would benefit from a little historical backdrop regarding this church office. Acts 6:1-7, the passage we read earlier, is a help in this regard. That’s not to say that the seven men that were given the responsibility to distribute food to the widows were deacons. They’re never called deacons in that text.

Still, Acts 6 reveals *why* the office of deacon was created in the first place. In that text, the apostles eloquently express both negatively and positively the need for shepherds to be relieved of the practical needs of the congregation. In Acts 6:2 the apostles state the need negatively, saying, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve [*diakonein*] tables.” Then, in verse 4, the apostles state the need positively, saying, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry [*diakonia*] of the word.”

The apostles' plan called for the appointment of seven men to whom they could hand over the responsibility of caring for the widows. Not just any men, but "men of good reputation, full of the [Holy] Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3 CSB). By solving the problem in this way, the apostles formed a new body of church officials. The two major categories of officials in the church at Jerusalem were the apostles and the Seven. The apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word – so their ministry was primarily *speaking*. The seven new officials devoted themselves to meeting practical needs – so their ministry was primarily *servicing*. The apostle Peter uses the same two categories when writing to believers in general, saying,

If anyone **speaks**, let it be as one who speaks God's words; if anyone **serves**, let it be from the strength God provides, so that God may be glorified through Jesus Christ in everything. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

- 1 Peter 4:11

Spiritual priorities and practical needs have always existed in the life of the church. So, it would be quite natural for local churches to duplicate what the apostles did in Jerusalem. Pastors/elders/overseers, like the apostles, are to serve God's people primarily through prayer and the ministry of the Word. Deacons, like the seven appointed officials in Acts 6, serve God's people primarily through meeting their practical needs under the direction of the pastors/elders/overseers.

Practical needs include the care of widows and the ministry of benevolence in general, but they also encompass more than that. John MacArthur notes, "No specifics are given in Scripture as to the duties of deacons. They were to carry out whatever tasks were assigned to them by the elders or needed by the congregation."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Alexander Strauch says that deacons are best understood as "formal assistants to the elders."<sup>2</sup> In terms of emphases, Jamie Dunlop provides a helpful framework of church ministry, saying that elders *lead* ministry, deacons *facilitate* ministry, and the congregation *does* ministry. Phil Ryken points out, "Whatever deacons do, the Bible leaves the church to decide; the Bible only dictates how they are to behave."<sup>3</sup>

## THE REQUIREMENTS (vv. 8-12)

Scripture says little about what deacons are to *do*. Its emphasis is on what they're to *be*. As we saw last week when studying the qualifications for elders, *character counts*. The same is true when it comes to deacons. The only essential difference in the requirements

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *1 Timothy*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons* (Colorado Springs: Lewis & Roth, 2017). Cited by Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 124.

between overseers and deacons is that overseers “must be able to teach.” A deacon is not required to possess that ability. But he must evidence a godly character.

God’s standard for deacons include four main areas: personal piety, doctrinal devotion, adequate assessment, and faithful family-life.

### Personal Piety

**Dignified:** “Deacons likewise must be dignified.” A deacon isn’t to be goofy – “a silly, flippant person, one who makes light of serious matters.”<sup>4</sup> This doesn’t mean a deacon should be dour and sour, looking like he was baptized in pickle juice. But it does mean that he understands the seriousness of life – the trials, the disappointments, the losses, the hardships people experience in this broken world. Isaiah portrayed the Messiah as “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3). Christ-like people take life seriously, a seriousness that earns the respect of others.

After giving this positive quality, what deacons ought to be, Paul state three negatives – what deacons ought *not* to be.

**Not double-tongued:** In other words, they’re not to say one thing to one person and say another thing to someone else. It’s easy for a deacon to be duplicitous if he’s not careful, because he’s constantly interacting with various individuals in the church. Most of us are familiar with the abbreviation TMI. A deacon needs to guard his tongue from disclosing *too much information* to or about those being served. A deacon needs to guard not only his mouth but also his ears – from listening to unwholesome talk (gossip, slander, etc.) about other church members, the church staff, or elders. Sadly, this kind of talk can even occur during deacons’ meetings, which is why deacons must keep one another in check.

It can be tempting to shade conversations a certain way with certain people out of fear of man or wanting the approval of man. It’s been said that gossip is saying something behind someone’s back that you’d never say to his face, and flattery is saying something to a person’s face that you would never say behind his back. Such should not be true of Christians and *must* not be true deacons. They are not to be double-tongued.

**Not addicted to much wine:** Deacons must exhibit self-control not only in their speech but also in their appetites. Those qualified to serve as deacons will not indulge cravings that would enslave their hearts or impair their judgments.<sup>5</sup> In his book, *The New Testament Deacon*, Alexander Strauch reminds us of some sad realities we already know but of which we need to be reminded:

Drunkenness has ruined countless lives. It is commonly reported that nearly half of the murders, suicides, and accidental deaths in America are related to alcohol. One in four families has some problem with alcohol, making alcohol one of the largest health problems in America. The misery and heartbreak that alcoholism has caused multitudes of families is beyond imagination. It reduces life expectancy, breaks up families, and destroys people financially. It’s a moral

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<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Smethurst, *Deacons*, 64.

and spiritual problem of the greatest magnitude. No one who has worked with the people or families who are its victims joke about its destructive power.<sup>6</sup>

In my previous church I did a funeral for a 15-year-old girl who along with two other friends were killed when they left a party in the middle of the night to do an alcohol run with a guy who was already drunk. Her parents had been members of our church but had begun attending less frequently and then eventually stopped attending altogether as they began making more money and amused themselves with worldly entertainment. We would run into them from time to time and urge them to return to the Lord and to our church fellowship. Every time the father would say something like, "We appreciate your concern but are busy with other things right now. Life is good, and we're enjoying it." I'll never forget the call I got from that same man in the middle of the night, around 2 AM. The first words I heard when I picked up the phone was, "Pastor Matt, she's dead! My daughter is dead! Oh, my God! She's dead!" I didn't even know who was calling until a moment later. That was the most difficult middle-of-the-night pastoral visit I've ever had.

Eventually some sort of a memorial fund, a student scholarship of sorts, was set up in the daughter's name and managed by her parents. Thousands of dollars were given by people in the community. But a couple of years later the dead girl's father was arrested for embezzling massive amounts from the fund to support his own alcohol and drug addiction. He wound up in jail, and his wife divorced him.

That's an extreme case, I know. But it's a reminder that sin takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, and costs you more than you want to pay. So, beware of the dangers of alcohol.

Interestingly, the word "addicted" in 1 Timothy 3:8 is the Greek word *prosechó*, which means "to turn one's mind to." What does your mind turn to when you come home from work, or as you anticipate getting together with friends over the weekend, or when you hear upsetting news, or are faced with a difficult problem? Scripture says, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).

Deacons understand the dangers and destructive influence of alcohol. So, they seek to be filled with the Spirit instead, exercising self-control and setting a godly example for others.

**Not greedy for dishonest gain:** Paul has already stated that one who aspires to the office of overseer must not be "a lover of money" (1 Tim. 3:3). The same is required of deacons. And it's easy to see why. The nature of their work will often involve deacons in the distribution of church funds. One who is greedy can easily become a thief and help himself to what's there. That's what Judas Iscariot did. He was in charge of the money box and used to pilfer what was put into it (John 12:6). Some deacons may not steal the money for themselves, but they love the power of the purse and use it to control and manipulate people for their own advantage. This is a betrayal of the office of deacon. "By definition, a deacon is someone who serves, not someone who helps himself. In the use of money, as in the use of words and alcohol, a deacon must lead a dignified life."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: Minister of Mercy* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1992), 98.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, Reformed Expository Commentary, New Testament edited by Daniel M. Doriani, series editors Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R

After listing three negative qualities – “not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain” – Paul states a positive quality for deacons in verse 9.

### Doctrinal Devotion

“They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (v. 9). Usually, we think of a mystery as something that is puzzling and difficult if not impossible to figure out. But in Scripture the word “mystery” refers to divine truth that was once hidden and is now revealed. “The mystery of all mysteries is the eternal plan of salvation that God has revealed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Paul talks about the gospel this way in Romans 16:25-27, where he says,

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

- Romans 16:25-27

Deacons are to show by their manner of living and their ministry to others that they cling to the gospel of Christ and to all Scripture, since *all Scripture is a testimony to Christ*. Deacons are to do this with a clear conscience, aligning their behavior with their beliefs. Every deacon ought to be able to testify as Paul did in 2 Corinthians 1:12:

We can say with confidence and a clear conscience that we have lived with a God-given holiness and sincerity in all our dealings. We have depended on God’s grace, not on our own human wisdom. That is how we have conducted ourselves before the world, and especially toward you.

- Paul the Apostle  
2 Corinthians 1:12 NLT

Every Christian should strive for such a testimony. Deacons must maintain such a testimony because of their influence as servant-leaders in the church. It’s not enough to say this about yourself. The pastors/elders and fellow church members must also be able to affirm these qualities in your life.

### Adequate Assessment

“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless” (v. 10). Scripture isn’t explicit about the nature or length of the testing – what it should involve and how long it should last. But there needs to be *some* sort of testing that lasts for a season – long enough for folks to get a good feel for whether a person is qualified to serve as a deacon.

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Publishing, 2007), 126. Concerning deacons, *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, states, “It is their duty to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church” (Atlanta: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1997), 9-2. Cited by Ryken, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

As Paul indicates in verse 11, the same standard applies to women: “Their wives [or, the women] likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.” Whether Paul is talking about deacons’ wives or female deacons has been the subject of dispute. Let me share with you four reasons why I believe Paul is talking about women in general, not necessarily deacons’ wives:

1. In the original text, the word “their” isn’t there. Paul simply says, “Women likewise....”
2. It doesn’t make sense for Paul to talk about deacons’ wives and not elders’ wives – especially since more is said about the elders’ responsibility in the home.
3. Paul uses the word “likewise” to transition from one group to a different group – from elders to deacons and then deacons to this group of women. Given the flow of the passage and Paul’s use of the word “likewise,” it seems more likely that Paul would be referring to female deacons rather than to deacons’ wives.
4. Paul didn’t use the word “deaconess” because there was no such word in first-century Greek language. The masculine form of *diakonos* was used of both men and women (cf. Romans 1:16). Using the term “women” was the only way Paul could distinguish them from male deacons.<sup>9</sup>

Here at Webster Bible Church, we recognize both male deacons and female deacons (deaconesses). Both groups hold equal status in terms of their office, for both serve the church under the oversight of the elders. The same could be said for ministry leaders, which is why I believe that they too should be subject to these same qualifications.

Before anyone serves as a deacon, he or she should be adequately assessed. With this in mind, each year we issue “Deacon” and “Deaconess” recommendation forms that our church members are encouraged to fill out and submit to the elders for consideration. The form includes about a dozen questions pertaining to the nominee’s qualifications. The last question we ask is, “Do you believe that he/she has been sufficiently tested in his/her Christian walk and has demonstrated that he/she is fully qualified to serve as a deacon/deaconess according to Scripture?” The elders then review all the recommendations and submit their approved list to the church members for their final affirmation and approval.

Different churches may vet their deacons differently, which is fine. The point is to have some procedure in place that gives the church leaders and members the opportunity to *adequately assess* a person’s character and competence for the office of deacon. The Bible puts this measure in place to protect the precious body of Christ. The Lord Jesus cares deeply for his church, and so should we.

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<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur notes, “A different term, *diakonissa*, was used for “deaconess” in postbiblical Greek (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 3:176).” John MacArthur, Jr., *1 Timothy*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 130. In his commentary on Romans, MacArthur points out, “Phoebe was no ordinary helper, but one of high esteem and integrity,” a woman that God used “to transport the first copy of this marvelous letter” to all the believers in Rome, a letter “which is one of the bedrocks of New Testament theology.” John MacArthur, Jr., *Romans*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 362.

## Faithful Family-Life

“Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well” (v. 12). Good household management is a requirement for deacons just as it is for elders (vv. 2a, 4-5). Just like the qualification for elders in verse 2, the phrase “husband of one wife” is made up of three Greek words that literally mean “one-woman man.” The emphasis is on his character. He is devoted to one woman: his wife.

Furthermore, he is a good manager – not only of his children but also of everything else in his household: money and possessions; family discipleship; healthy communication and conflict resolution.

If you wonder whether a man is ready to be a deacon, take a look at his home life. Is he devoted to his wife? Does he teach and nurture his children? Does he treat his family members and others with kindness? Is the name of Christ exalted? “A man who cannot manage his own household well will bring disorder to God’s house.”<sup>10</sup>

## THE REWARD (v. 13)

Paul ends on a positive note, with a word of encouragement and motivation for would-be deacons. After listing the requirements, Paul emphasizes the reward: “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.” Two rewards await faithful deacons and deaconesses:

### 1. Good standing

The Greek word for standing (*bathmos*) refers to “a step (of a stairway).” Paul uses the term metaphorically to refer to the elevated status of faithful deacons and deaconesses. Those who serve well earn the respect and admiration of others – not because they seek such esteem but because the Lord delights to honor those who honor him.

### 2. Great confidence

Not in themselves but in the truth of God’s word as lived out in the company of those who embrace it – their fellow believers, the family of God. God’s word works! – and we his people are blessed “as we walk with the Lord in the light of his word.”

The best servant-leaders in the church know that we serve God because he first served us. In the end, that’s what makes our labors for the Lord so enriching and so rewarding.

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<sup>10</sup> Ryken, 130.