

Valley Bible Church – Sermon Transcript

"The Character of Church Deacons" 1 Timothy 3:8-13

You might remember the United States basketball team from the Olympics. A pretty famous group here. These are some of the best basketball players in the world by all accounts. They were not quite as successful as some teams in the past have been.

There is the Argentinean's team. They won the gold medal and they only had one NBA player on their team. He probably wouldn't have even made our team. We not only lost to the Argentineans, we lost to the Puerto Ricans (who also only have one NBA player, who doubtfully would have made our team), and we lost to the Lithuanians who had no NBA players on their team. You have to wonder how could the best basketball players in the world lose to countries that don't have the players that we have or at least so we think. There are a few Americans that would also be the best basketball players in the world and they chose not to even participate.

You have to come up with one conclusion. Basketball is a team sport. It is not an individual sport; it really doesn't matter how great an individual is if he's not playing on a team that's playing together as the other teams were, the team is not going to be successful. There was a time when our players were so good compared to other players around the world that we could manage to win even though we were not playing together as a team, but that day is long past. So now we are in a new era and we have to see the team as such, not just a group of great individuals.

So it is with the church. It truly doesn't make much of a difference how great an individual may be in his capacities and his abilities if he is not able to play with other people as a team. If he does not have the kind of character to serve well with other people, it's going to be a failed effort.

So as we look this morning at the Scriptures we will see what God's qualifications are for a team. Being in a leadership position of a church requires certain qualifications being met, and here are God's qualifications.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 speaks of deacons. "Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, (9) but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (10) And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. (11) Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. (12) Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. (13) For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

So deacons have to meet certain qualifications, and as you look at these qualifications you will find that these are basically character qualities. They don't necessarily need skills to be the best at administration, public speaking, or leadership, but they need character qualities. As churches choose deacons, hopefully they are looking at somebody that has these character qualities as opposed to somebody that might have a high business standing or great skill, because they might be individually talented but not have a character that would meet the qualifications that God would

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have. Some churches may choose people that have a lot of money so the church finances would be supported well, but there is none of that really here either.

As we look at a deacon, first we have to look at what this is. The word "deacon" means servant. It's actually a fairly common word. Even in the next chapter we see it used as meaning servant. So, people that are serving as deacons are servants. But here it means an official position in the church; it's something that is defined as a position. There are elders, who are leading and overseeing the church, and then there are deacons, who in this passage are not given a task, just what their character is.

We can make an educated guess that their task was similar to Acts 6. There we find a group of people set apart by the apostles for the task of bringing church unity among the Jews and the non-Jews that had gathered in the church of Acts 6 that had a bit of a dispute, and there were certain people appointed to that task. Certainly you can look at these characteristics and say that these aren't just people who have a small role. These are people who are holding some significant positions.

So here is how we use our deacons at Valley Bible. There are seventeen of them, and they assist our four elders in oversight of the church, and they serve in leadership of specific ministries. So when we are dealing with issues and need consultation, which we do regularly, we bring the matters of the church before the deacons and they consult with us as to what would be the wisest course of action.

But more important than that, and that's very important, is that they are managing the ministries of the church. Individual deacons are overseeing specific ministries in order for them to function successfully, because the sum is only as good as the parts. If we don't have good well-functioning parts, the oversight is going to be struggling. We need faithful, reliable, and skilled people to be able to serve in this capacity. So it is no small thing, and that is why it's been given some attention in the Scriptures, which we will look at.

As we look at these characteristics of church deacons, we look right off the bat at verse 8.

"Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain."

These characteristics are very similar to what we found in the characteristics of elders. There are character qualities for elders and character qualities for deacons, and there is a great deal of similar overlap. It is not that the elders have a higher degree of moral quality and the deacons are the second-rate people; that's not it at all. They are the same characteristics that are being demanded. There is one notable difference, however, elders must be able to teach. That is because in giving oversight to the church, part of this necessary oversight is guiding in terms of doctrine and instruction in bringing the truth of God's Word to bear on the lives of people.

Now all of us should be doing this, individually teaching those around us, but elders have a specific responsibility to defend the faith, to protect the church from false doctrine, and to guide the church in true doctrine. This is why they have that characteristic. The more help we get from the deacons, the more help we get from others, the better, but there is this one difference.

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Now we look to this list. Deacons must be men of dignity, they must be committed, some versions say respect, but what this word strictly means is someone who is serious about what they are doing, committed. In their leadership they can only lead people to the place where they are, they can't expect people to be any more committed to the work than they are, they must take this seriously. This isn't something that they kind of do part time as they fit it into their busy schedule, but they have a commitment to do this so that we can count on it. They have reliability to be faithful in this because they are serious about their ministry.

A deacon must be consistent not double-tongued. Double-tongued is someone that speaks out of both sides of their mouth. They say one thing to one person and another thing to another person, and this is tempting for people that are in leadership because they want people to be together and unified. Some people have some ideas and other people have conflicting ideas or beliefs and its easy to then be temped to want to say something to one person to make them happy and another thing to another person to make them happy. That really is not very godly, it's not a quality of deacons. In the long run, it doesn't work very well, because ultimately people are going to figure out what really is going on and you just can't pacify people that just don't agree. You really need to shoot straight and explain things truthfully, consistently, not double-tongued.

A deacon must be controlled, must manage his life so that he is not addicted to wine or any other substance. He's not prone to being caught up in addictions that will take him away from the task at hand and not be addicted to wine. He must control himself. That's a fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit. A Spirit-filled life will manifest a controlled life.

A deacon must be content. Now my version says not fond of sorted gain. Yours may say something about dishonest gain, but the word used here in the Scriptures means "greedy for gain" in a broad sense. It was used often as gaining in a dishonest way, but it also was used as just being greedy for gain. So I would suggest that not just deacons should refrain from swindling or embezzling or even seeking to gain in any fashion, or being selfish in their finances, because deacons are servants, serving, giving, and helping other people. Church leaders, if they are not careful, can find themselves in positions where they can manipulate people, and that would be totally wrong. To do this in terms of finances would be in opposition to this qualification. So, they have a position of standing that can be used for good or for bad, so we need to be careful that people are qualified.

Now, verse nine speaks of the conviction that church deacons must have. **"But holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience."** They are holding to the mystery of the faith, that is, they possess New Testament faith, and I call it New Testament faith because they are holding to the mystery of the faith.

This word "mystery" is a term that Paul uses in Scripture to mean something that had not been revealed previously in the Old Testament but now has been revealed to us in the New Testament. He uses this term again at the end of the chapter in 1 Timothy 3:16. **"And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory."** He describes the incarnation of Christ and that He is proclaimed among the Gentiles.

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The meaning of "mystery" in Paul's usage of it is something that has been revealed. Specifically what has been revealed is that Christ has come to bring Jews and Gentiles together into one body. According to his teaching in Ephesians 2 and Ephesians 3, he uses "mystery" in the sense of bringing Jews and Gentiles together. That is what is revealed. It wasn't like this in the past, but now in the New Testament it is.

So deacons must understand the New Testament faith and be practicing that faith. They must be holding to this mystery of faith and be holding to it with a clear conscience, practicing it, not holding back, not rebellious, not resistant but actually doing what they profess to hold to. That's a qualification; they are putting their faith into practice.

Now there is a confirmation process. This confirmation is simply that they are tested. Deacons should be approved by a period of testing. **"And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach."**

Now what is this testing? Does it mean we hand out a quiz and they fill in the blanks and hand it back in and we say, ah you pass? No, that's not it. They didn't give a test back then. They didn't have degrees they passed out. This was essentially an on-the-job training and the present tense of this passage supports that this is an on-the-job process. As people are serving, there is an evaluation that is taking place whether they realize it or if anybody realizes it. We are truly just thinking about what is going on and how things can be better served and how some people are very faithful in what they are doing and that is noticed.

This is an on-the-job thing. So, you don't have to be a deacon to be serving by any stretch of the imagination. All of us should be serving and serving in different capacities, and as that is happening, then we see an on-the-job evaluation taking place.

That's why we can say that the average deacon at Valley Bible has been attending and serving our fellowship for over eighteen years. I did the math. I counted up the eighteen deacons and how long they have been here and it's a long time, and it's not just because we have old people here. This says something. This says that we are just not trying to find somebody to fill some slot. Hey, you're interested. Lets stick you in. We are willing to be patient and see if people are really committed to the ministry that they are doing and then accept them as deacons. It says something else too. Deacons are doing this for a long period of time. We don't just rotate people in and out in a three-year period. We can't expect that you are just going to serve for no more than two or three years, that it is just too much and we need to give you a rest. No, that's not the attitude.

The attitude of serving is that we are serving because this is our life of serving. We love it and we want to do this and we don't want to do this for just one or two years and then take a break. We want to do this continually and that's why there is a sense of a commitment. Not just for the elders but for the deacons, that we are doing this as a commitment, this is our life, this is what we want to do and there are no term limits related to it. There's a sense of a life commitment to it.

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Now this doesn't mean that things can't change and so forth down the line of circumstances, but there's a belief going into this that this is a commitment. Because it's important, it's really critical for the life of our church that we have deacons that are functioning well, and I believe we do. In fact, I believe that if the four elders disappeared today, we would not be in a ditch as a church. We would continue to be able to teach the truth of God's Word very well, and we would move successfully forward as a church because of the leaders that we have as deacons.

Now there is another verse that is a little more challenging here. It has to do with the women and there are different views of this. Verse 11 says, "**Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.**" Now it addresses women. So this shows that we have deacons that are male or female. The word "women" does not need to mean only deacon's wives, and there are some reasons for this. There are some translations that will come flat out and say, "Deacon's wives likewise must be dignified," but that is an interpretation. Strictly the Scripture says women must be dignified. The Greek text doesn't describe this as being wives of deacons. So now we have to make an interpretation here. Is this wives of deacons or is this women in general? Well, I can't really think of a good reason why this must be strictly the wives of deacons, but I can think of some reasons why this should be women in general, and I will give them to you. None of these are a slam-dunk, but taken together I think they are pretty weighty of why it's women and not just deacon's wives.

First, there are no qualifications for wives of elders and you would think that if anyone should have their wives specifically qualified it should be the elders. They are the ones having the responsibility for the oversight of the church. We don't find them. We find that these women here have qualifications, so we think these are not deacon's wives but women having roles in the church as deaconesses.

Next is the word "likewise." The word "likewise" comes in verse eleven, "**Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.**" Verse eight also says, "**Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain.**" So you kind of have these two sections that are led into by the word "likewise" that sets verse eleven apart from the other group. These women are likewise similar but they are unique in their own right.

In Romans 16:1 we have a case for a women who is described as a deaconess or as a servant depending upon how you want to interrupt that. But it seems that it doesn't describe her just as serving, but as a servant in an official capacity, and she's a woman, which would lead you to think this is speaking of women who are deacons.

Then there's the word "their" missing. It would be handy if it meant "deacons' wives" we would have a possessive pronoun attaching the wives to the deacon or the women to the deacons, but that's not there.

And then finally, the qualifications. As you look at the qualifications in verse eleven, they parallel the qualifications for the deacons. They are not in addition to, they just parallel. In fact, we have "women must be dignified" and in verse eight "deacons must be dignified." That's how parallel they are, very similar.

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So, as we look at deaconesses, they must be committed, dignified, serious, to the task, taking it seriously. They not only must be committed, they must be careful; they must not be malicious gossips. They must not speak in ways that hurt people; they must be careful in their speech. They must be controlled, not addicted to things but temperate. Temperate is being balanced, not prone to excess, but able to be careful in balance, being consistent, faithful in all things. In all that they do, they are to do this faithfully. We can rely on them and they can be counted on, because they're faithful and they're consistent. This is what the women ought to be as deacons.

Now it also stands to reason that we have a group of people who are deacons as women, because there are certain tasks in the church that women can do in a way that is different than how men can do them. Like for example, children's ministries. As we noted when we got to the end of chapter two, women have a ministry with children, which is unique and important and critical. Women's ministry is another. Women can do this in a different way in ministering to women than men can. So there's a role for women to play in a leadership position in certain capacities in the church, so it stands to reason why we have a separate verse dealing with deaconesses.

Deacons also must be controlled. **"Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households."** They must be controlled, good managers of themselves. They must control themselves. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, not out of control moving from person to person. This doesn't just need to mean that they must be married, but this means a one woman man, which means in this passage of someone that doesn't have an attachment to this woman and then that woman and flirts around. That would be inconsistent with the character quality of elders or deacons.

"Let deacons be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households." Now all parents, whether they know this or not, whether they are on the task or not, are having some influence on their children. There's some management taking place even if they don't realize it. The key is good management. That we are seeking to lead our children toward God, toward godliness, not just by management or happenstance or any means necessary but good, godly management of the children. That's important. That's a qualification of the whole household.

Even today we find some households end up with more than just the wife and the children but with the extended family as well. But this means probably even more than that, because some households in this time and place year's ago included servants as well. So, regardless of who's in your household, you have to manage them well; that's a qualification.

And there's a reason for this. If we cannot lead those closest to us, we cannot lead those furthest from us. If we cannot be successful with the people that are most likely to respond to us, who we spend the most time with, who care about us more; how in the world are we going to lead anybody that really doesn't need to care about us at all and is more distant from us. So this is why this qualification is there for elders and for deacons. They must manage their own household well.

Which brings us to verse thirteen. Verse thirteen is an important verse. It speaks to the commendation that the church deacons have. **"For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus."** This is such an important thing that it is recognized as being rewarded.

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Now this word "standing" simply means high standing. It's the only place that it shows up in Scripture, so you have to make an interpretation. Is this high standing before man, or is this high standing before God? Well you know people are fickle, and I don't know if we can guarantee anybody if they are a deacon will have any high standing before man because men can be thoughtless as to give you a high standing. Even in a time when we have persecution in the church, it is even more unlikely that the community would view deacons very well.

Though here is one thing you can count on and that is what you serve will be seen by God and will be rewarded by God, and He can rightfully give a high standing to people who have served well. Irregardless of whether you hold an official title of an elder or a deacon or no title at all, you just serve in a ministry or you don't have an official responsibility, what it boils down to is you have a God-given potential. God has entrusted you with good works which He has prepared beforehand according to Ephesians 2:10. So, you have this potential within you that God has given to you to fulfill. If you are fulfilling your potential and you are serving the Lord and serving people as God has intended you to serve, then He will reward you, and you will achieve a high standing.

But I'm sure that there are people that have been distracted in such a way as to skim their lives to things that are less significant. Hopefully you will resist the temptation to give your lives to things that are fleeting and passing away, and you will commit yourselves to that which is most lasting. When you do that, when you serve the Lord and others in the way that God rewards us, we can take that to the bank. We can count on that. Moth and rust won't destroy it; it will be reserved for us.

We not only have that high standing before God, we can have an assurance of our faith, because God has promised that if you believe, you have eternal life. How can you be sure of this? You can be sure in this way. When salvation comes not by your works but by God's grace in your life, you can be sure that you really have believed, not just kidding yourself by looking at how you are responding to the Lord.

Are you following Christ? Here's where God went when He came as a man, when He came and dwelt among us. Jesus said in Mark 10:45, **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."** And in His service, He gave. If you can look at your life and see that you are serving and you are giving and you are seeking to serve other people, then you can have confidence that you are not kidding yourself but your belief is real and you can have the great confidence in faith that is in Christ Jesus that is spoken of here.

So how do we end up with people that are deacons? We end up with people that are deacons because they have desired within themselves to help people and one thing leads to the next. The one thing that is always going to be true is that the laborers are few and the harvest is plentiful. There will always be a need for people to get things done in serving the Lord. And so as people within themselves want to serve and want to help, the type of people who say I'll do that, how can I help, just simply because they love people and they want God's will to be done through others and through this church, then those people will be faithful; and as the years go by they will gain more and more responsibility, because we need people to take responsibility to accomplish the work of God in this church. Then they end up being deacons and having other substantial ministry positions, and they will be rewarded.

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So we can know that the maturity of a deacon comes as a process of growing in obedience, and hopefully you are responding to this as God has designed for you. This is a great opportunity to move into our communion service.