

July 23, 2006

“Deacons: The Qualifications” 1 Timothy 3:8-13

FCF: Lowering standards

PROPOSITION: (anchor) For the sake of the ministry of the gospel,
(magnet) we must exercise great care in the selection of deacons.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Some of you know I played a bit of soccer growing up. Some was in “recreation leagues” where there are no tryouts, just the need to pay the fee, show up, and have fun. But some was for my high school or on traveling teams where there were not only tryouts but cuts and the ongoing need to stay sharp if you wanted to stay off the bench.

Life is full of things like that. Some things are less intense and thus have minimal standards – games with small children, first tries at new things. Others are of more vital importance and thus have higher standards – accounting, engineering design, medical treatment. Some things allow for latitude. Others don’t. When expediency makes certain demands, some things allow for lowering the standards. Others don’t.

What about church offices? This is the second of a two part series on the office of deacon. Last week we looked at what deacons are to do. This week we’re looking at how they are selected, at their qualifications. What are they? What does God say?

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Timothy 3:8-13

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

When I was in college, one of my tougher summer jobs was working for a moving company. And one of the tougher assignments always involved wealthy families. Yes, you could hope for cold drinks and maybe even a meal. That was a plus. But there was always some priceless heirloom, some valuable piece that demanded great care. Special cushioning, extra wrappings, more manpower as we would get it out of the house, secured on the truck, and to the next destination. Fragile items always demand great care.

Now deacons aren’t usually fragile but selecting them is important. And so it demands great care. One could put it this way. For the sake of the ministry of the gospel, we must exercise great care in the selection of deacons. Why? It goes back to our study last week in Acts 6 which showed the importance of both the ministry of the Word and of deeds. Both are of equal importance. So much so that both demand exclusive attention. The elders overseeing the actions of the deacons. One group focusing on pastoral care, the other on practical service – their work overlapping at times, complementing one another, working closely beside one another. All that is to say that for the sake of the ministry of the gospel, we must appoint deacons to assist the elders in their task.

That’s the first part – what we are to do. But the second part entails this – how we are to do it, how we are to select such men and their qualifications. The key is the word translated “blameless” – the standard by which a candidate is to be tested and proven (**READ 1 Timothy 3:10**). The flow of the passage going something like this. Verses 8 and 9 set the stage for the standard. Verses 11 and 12 go further, clarifying its meaning. If a man is to serve as a deacon, he must be blameless. Meaning not a reference to perfection but to progress, not one without fault or flaw but one without blemish or blame. He must be one whose character and conduct is free from damaging accusations. His life must make the gospel credible. He must be blameless. And this blamelessness is the fundamental qualification. Such is the nature of his calling, the calling of the deacon. Great care is then called for in the selection process. Great care and fervent prayer.

I. BLAMELESS IN HIS OBSERVED BEHAVIOR

He must be blameless in his observed behavior, in what can be seen of his life (**READ 1 Timothy 3:8**). He must be “*dignified*” – worthy of respect with character that evokes esteem from others. Paul then goes on to unpack this by showing what it is not.

A) *Matters of Speech*

1. Truthful

He begins with matters of speech. The deacon must not be “*double-tongued*.” He must be truthful. As Will Rogers said, he must be “*not afraid to sell the family parrot to the town gossip*.” Sincere, not talking out of both sides of his mouth, a man of his word.

2. Credible

Credible. What he says can be believed because what he says can be counted on as true.

B) *Matters of Influence*

Paul then moves from matters of speech to what we’ll call matters of “influence.”

1. Drink

In terms of alcohol – and by extension any other substances – he must exercise self-control. To fail to do so would quickly undermine his reputation and his effectiveness.

2. Money

But that is not the only thing that must not control or influence. Money is included too – “*not greedy for dishonest gain*.” Here too he needs self-control that he might be trusted.

Both areas – of speech and influence – can either enhance or destroy the degree to which a man can be described as “*dignified*.” In many respects, this is simply another way of saying what we did in Acts 6 (**READ Acts 6:3**). Blameless in observed behavior.

Illustration:

Think with me. Would you entrust your life, your children, or your finances to an unknown, unproven person? Would you ever let desperation drive your placing an individual into such sensitive places of influence? No? Why then with the church?

Application:

The man must be blameless in his observed behavior. And, not surprisingly, the characteristics Paul lists here are not random choices. They fit with the offices. The deacon is an authorized agent, a representative, of the elders. What sort of representation of the shepherds, the overseers, will that man offer? Of the church? Of the Lord?

With respect to the congregation, the deacon also has a sacred trust. He is in a position of “opportunity” to do great good or great harm. Handling the church funds. Ministering to the most vulnerable. He must then be a man of solid character.

This is who we need. And this is who the Lord will raise up. For He always supplies what He demands. Or who. And so we pray. And we consider. And we wait.

II. BLAMELESS IN HIS THEOLOGICAL CONVICTIONS

Paul begins with insisting on a blamelessness in the deacon’s observable character. He then moves on to his theological convictions (**READ 1 Timothy 3:9**).

A) *Grounded by the Gospel*

The deacon must be grounded in the gospel, in the “*mysterion*” of the faith. A distinction needs to be made. Our notion of “mystery” has to do with truth withheld. But the biblical notion has to do with truth unveiled – something once hidden now revealed.

1. Truth once hidden

What was this truth once hidden? The question, hidden for centuries, was “*How can God forgive sin?*” Given how holy He is and how repulsive sin is, how can we be forgiven?

2. Now revealed

The gospel, the truth once hidden now revealed, pictured in shadows and hinted at in the prophets, is Christ crucified. The Son of God coming as the Son of Man that we might become sons of God. Jesus Christ coming to rescue His people from what they deserved.

The deacon must be grounded in this, having heard it and given assent to it.

B) Shaped by the Gospel

But more than that, he must not only be grounded by the gospel but shaped by it as well. What is in his head must impact his heart – not separating life from doctrine, not living by an inconsistent, hypocritical pattern, but holding fast in the storm.

1. Standing against the tide

Standing against the tide, against the pressure to conform, with radically different convictions. Indeed, the context of this letter is Paul's concern for the church and the influence of false teachers (**READ 1 Timothy 1:5, 18-20**). The deacon needs to stand.

2. Striving to flesh out his faith

Not only against what's out there but what's in here. Standing against the tide and striving to flesh out his faith. Not perfectly but still movement and progress.

Or, to sum it all up, the man is real. His faith is real and so too is he.

Illustration:

What you don't want is this (**READ 1 Timothy 4:1-2**). It's quite an image – a seared conscience, the ability and awareness of the morality of one's actions crippled. It reminds me of summers as a child spent barefoot running all through the grass, then the woods, then the gravel, and then the holly leaves. Calluses are great for little boys' feet in play. And for older boys' hands at work. But not the hearts of a deacon in ministry.

Application:

Again, the man must be blameless in his observed behavior. The characteristics Paul lists here are not random choices. They fit with the office. What does this mean in terms of the deacon being an agent of the elders? The elder must, as Paul says earlier in the chapter, be "*able to teach*." That is not a requirement for the deacon. He can be a gifted teacher but he need not be. But he still must understand well what's being taught. For that is the foundation of every ministry and service he will be asked to carry out.

This is who we need. And this is who the Lord will raise up. For He always supplies what He demands. Or who. And so we pray. And we consider. And we wait.

III. BLAMELESS IN HIS LIFE AT HOME

Blameless in his observable behavior. Blameless in his theological convictions. And finally, blameless in his life at home (**READ 1 Timothy 3:11-12**).

A) In Relation to His Wife

Two things are apparent here. The first has to do with the man and his wife.

1. Their marriage

He is, literally, to be "*a one-woman man*." Meaning not a prohibition against polygamy for it goes much farther than that. Nor is it a command to be married for Paul is assuming they are married and speaks to what ought to characterize that relationship. Neither is it speaking to remarriage after a divorce or the death of a spouse. No, it speaks to an exclusive devotion, a faithfulness that has no rivals. He is "*a one-woman man*."

2. Her character

But there are some things said not only about the husband but the wife as well. Part of his qualifications are her character – a character that matches his own. Now, admittedly,

there is some debate as to how to translate this. Verse 11 literally reads “*Women must likewise be...*” So the context determines who these women are. Some say they are women deacons. Others say they are women assisting the deacons. I’ve done no small bit of study on this and I have to tell you that I truly believe who Paul is referring to is the wives of the deacons he is describing back in verses 8 through 10 and then 12 and 13.

So his character matters, her character matters, and so too does the character of their marriage. These things all come into play in whether a man can serve as a deacon.

B) In Relation to His Management

But Paul speaks to other things in the home as well.

1. Of his children

The man’s “managing” his children – what kind of parent he is.

2. Of his household

His “managing” of the overall household affairs – what kind of steward he is.

It’s a “lesser-to-greater” argument. “*He must do this in order to be allowed to do that.*” Paul is saying that a man is not ready for the responsibilities of others’ spiritual welfare if he is not willing and able to take responsibility for those in his own household.

Application:

Here again, the “blamelessness” being called for is not random. It fits the task. Behind closed doors in the privacy of the home, we see what a man is really like. In all these things, he needs to be a light in a dark world, a living demonstration of God’s design. He needs to be a model in the church, a leader for others to follow.

And they – the husband and wife – need to be a team. One in purpose, committed to his calling. He will need her counsel. She may even be called on for more.

This is who we need. And this is who the Lord will raise up. For He always supplies what He demands. Or who. And so we pray. And we consider. And we wait.

CONCLUSION:

For the sake of the ministry of the gospel, we must exercise great care in the selection of the deacons – no matter how arduous or inconvenient it might be. And it often is. I’ve mentioned the “fittedness” of these qualifications. Think of it this way.

This past week marked 37 years since the Apollo 11 moon landing. Which got me thinking of the pioneer days of space exploration, the space race with the Soviet Union. Manned flight began with the Mercury program. Now prior to the selection of the Mercury Seven, all the candidates had to submit themselves to a battery of tests. One of these test sites was the Lovelace Clinic in Albuquerque, New Mexico. There they faced innumerable straps, hoses, clamps, and needles. They endured electrodes in their muscles, tests and specimens taken of all kinds, poked and probed through every orifice of the body. It got to be too much to take. They felt like lab rats. “*What does this have to do with flying into space? What do these tests have to do with determining who is fit to go?*” It all seemed so disconnected – no fit between the tests and the tasks ahead.

That is not what you see here. The tests as to a deacon’s qualifications are wedded tightly to his task. He must then be blameless. He must be proven. And as the Church heeds these words, as we exercise the care required in the selection of candidates, we have the greatest assurance from the Lord of the Church Himself that as the Lord’s people do the Lord’s work the Lord’s way in the Lord’s strength for the Lord’s glory, He will be honored and His Church built up. May it be so with us even here, even now.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) For the sake of the ministry of the gospel,
(magnet) we must exercise great care in the selection of deacons.