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1 Timothy 3:8-13

Eighth Message

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# LEADERS WHO SERVE

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

What do you think is the devil's most effective strategy for disrupting the work of God's kingdom in our day? One of his most powerful tactics often goes undetected because it flies beneath the radar, as we say. It is the ploy of distraction. We become so consumed with the tyranny of the urgent that we neglect the most important things. My friend, Todd Pickett, has a word for us on this matter. He wrote:

Urgency characterizes something whose value rises to supremacy for a brief span of time. Urgent matters must be taken care of immediately and for their moment of glory demand our full attention... Importance, on the other hand, abides in something that has consistent value unaffected by time. Probably the most compatible synonym would be "worth," whose root in classical Greek literally means "tipping the scales"—something that has weight... The problem arises when those things deemed "urgent" consistently preempt those things we recognize as "important." The danger is that we can become so bound to the urgent that we never are free to undertake the important... The horror of ignoring this issue is the inevitable realization that one has spent one's life doing what was urgent, but not what was important.

In our studies in the apostle Paul's letter to Timothy we come to the order of leadership in the church, an order designed to solve the very problem we have highlighted. Last week, we looked at the qualifications for elders; today Paul turns his attention to the selection of deacons, people who are set aside to serve the practical needs of the body. We will begin by looking at the origin of the office in the book of Acts, and then its qualifications and rewards, in 1 Timothy.

The origin of the office is found in Acts chapter 6.

## I. The Origin of Deacons (Acts 6:1-4)

### A. The problem: Dissension

**In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1 TNIV)**

In the early church, a significant number of widows did not have families to support them, so they were placed under the financial care of the congregation. The apostles, who had been set aside for the spiritual oversight of the body, added to their list of duties the important task of the distribution of a daily food allowance to these widows. But soon a complaint arose over what appeared to be the neglect of one group. Whether the complaint was legitimate or not it brought to the surface a long-standing division between Greek-speaking Jews, known as the Hellenists, and Hebrew-speaking Jews.

The source of the discord dated back to the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). Alexander's armies swept through Asia Minor, Palestine, and Egypt, and Greek language and philosophy became dominant in the culture. Seeing this development as an opportunity for worldwide mission, progressive Jews in Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (284-247 BC) to bring all nations into the light of God's kingdom.

This was a monumental step toward world evangelism. But not all Jews were so enthusiastic. More traditionalists regarded this development as a threat to the purity of Judaism. They boycotted the new language and cultivated instead the vernacular Aramaic, if not the Mishnaic Hebrew, the language of the rabbis. (We can see a similar response in the Catholic Church, when many medieval scholars clung tenaciously to Latin in their church services, refusing to use English). These contrasting attitudes created a linguistic cleavage among God's people as traditionalist Hebrew-speaking Jews felt superior to those who spoke Greek. With this background we can begin to understand how, if left unchecked, the widows' complaint in the book of Acts could have easily ignited centuries of dissension and split the body of Christ.

If a problem of this magnitude arose in the church today, we would expect the leaders of the church—the elders, in other words—to handle the situation directly. But, as we will see, the apostles chose a different solution.

### B. The Real Danger: Distraction

**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." (Acts 6:2)**

Recognizing that this dispute posed a serious threat to the body, the apostles summoned the whole congregation to address the issue. But they also had the insight to discern that behind these complaints lay satanic forces designed to distract them from their primary calling. Over time the apostles came to realize that attempting to meet all the needs of the congregation had caused them to neglect the ministry of the word of God. It was time to make a major course correction. They therefore concluded that no matter how critical the crisis, they were not to be the ones to manage it. If they handled it directly, it would not be long before another one came along vying for their attention, until the "good" would ultimately undermine the "best." Leaders are not to be driven by the tyranny of the urgent, feverishly putting out the myriad of fires that come their way, but are to remain fixed on their calling. This requires continually saying "No" to the many good things that demand our attention in order to say "Yes" to the best.

Staying focused on proper priorities is extremely difficult when any movement or organization faces rapid growth and competing agendas clamor for attention. Perhaps no one faced this kind of pressure more than Jesus, yet we find him unmoved by rival agendas or anything that would distract him from his calling. I'm sure Peter remembered when Jesus first ministered in his home town of Capernaum. After a day of authoritative teaching, casting out demons, and healing, by evening the whole town had gathered at Peter's door to be healed. Next morning, Jesus went off to a solitary place to pray. When Peter and his friends finally found him, they exclaimed, "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (Mark 1:35-38). Refocused by prayer, Jesus remained fixed on his priorities. He did not come to heal, but to preach. And now the apostles have arrived at the same conclusion: they have not been set aside to wait on tables, but to preach and pray.

### C. The Solution: Delegation

**“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 will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:3-4)**

The solution was to delegate the task to other individuals of mature character and allow specialization to occur based on different gifts, whether speaking or serving. The title “deacon” comes from the verb *diakone*, “to serve,” which was central to Jesus’ description of his role as Messiah: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In its primary sense, “serve” meant “waiting at table,” or “providing for physical sustenance.” What had been born out of necessity—caring and feeding of widows in Jerusalem—had now become a regular church office, referring to various kinds of ministry and workers who assisted the elders. By setting up two distinct offices based on one’s gifts, the church was able to grow in an atmosphere of order, specialization, and excellence.

With this context in mind we can better understand the qualifications that Paul sets forth for the office.

## II. The Qualifications for Deacons (1 Tim 3:8-12)

### A. Personal Character

**In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. (3:8)**

The apostle begins his instructions about deacons with the word “likewise,” implying that his words concerning an elder’s reputation apply to deacons as well: they should be *semnos*, “worthy of respect.” The term means “noble” or “dignified,” suggesting that their mode of behavior is above the ordinary and therefore worthy of respect. But you might ask, why should individuals designated to wait on tables be required to have such worthy character? The answer is that it doesn’t matter whether one is speaking in the pulpit or serving coffee in the patio; all represent the Lord we serve and impact those for whom Christ died. Peter highlights the holy demeanor required in the exercise of all gifts, whether speaking or serving:

**Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If you speak, you should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10-11)**

Paul now gives three specific prohibitions that pose a threat to a deacon’s integrity. The first is “insincerity” of speech (lit. “not double-tongued”). Quinn defines this as “*retailing gossip*”...and suggests “a person who repeats what he has heard or seen to others...a special occupational hazard of the *deacons*, who were the social workers of the ancient congregations. There would be no lack of an audience ready to be entertained by a lively narrative about the latest ‘case’ in which the deacon had intervened.”<sup>1</sup> Others suggest it refers to telling one thing to one person and something else to another. This is extremely damaging to the community when serving parties who are embroiled in disputes or controversies. A deacon must be consistent in his words.

Secondly, a deacon must not be “indulging in much wine.” The verb implies not only a physical addiction, but also a preoccupation of the mind. D. G. Mandelbaum, in his essay “Alcohol and Culture,” observes how different cultures attempt to curb the dangers of alcohol abuse:

When the fate of many hinges on the action of a single person, that person is usually not permitted to drink before performing critical

activity. The high priests of the Old Testament...were particularly forbidden to drink...when discharging priestly duties in the Sanctuary...American pilots today are forbidden to drink for a number of hours before flying as well as during the flight...Yet another ban that appears in various cultures is imposed when it is considered dangerous to heighten the emotions of large numbers of people who gather at the same occasion...[T]here is an inscription at Delphi which forbids the carrying of wine in to the stadium on pain of a five-drachma fine.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, because a deacon is entrusted with money it is an absolute necessity that he be free from greed. If greed gains entrance into the soul, like a tenacious weed it will quickly take root and spread until it takes over the entire garden and drives a person to do the most shameful things, debasing what is holy for money. The stench of greed was pervasive in Ephesus. Young temple priestesses were drugged into semi-consciousness to spout their senseless oracles in the name of religion. For the price of their sexual sanctity, the money-mangers of Ephesus raked in enough profit to make their temple of prostitution the Seventh Wonder of the World.

By contrast, George Mueller, who spent his life caring for orphans in England in the 1800’s, never made pleas for money. Instead, he trusted in prayer alone, as the following except from his diary reveals:

*December 16, [1842].* Nothing has come in. At six o’clock this evening, our need was very great in the orphan houses and the day schools. I prayed with two of the laborers. We needed some money to come in before eight o’clock tomorrow morning, so we could buy milk for breakfast. Our hearts were at peace, and we felt assured that our Father would supply our need.

We had scarcely risen from our knees when I received a letter containing a sovereign for the orphans. About five minutes later, a brother promised to give me fifty pounds next week. A quarter of an hour after that, a brother gave me a sovereign, which a sister in the Lord has left for the orphans. How sweet and precious it is to see the willingness of the Lord to answer the prayers of His needy children!<sup>3</sup>

By 1875, George Mueller had lodged, fed, and educated more than 2,000 children. He refused to take a salary for himself, but trusted in prayer alone to provide for his needs and those of his orphans.

After these three prohibitions, Paul gives a summary description of a deacon’s integrity: “They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.” This suggests that they not only have a clear understanding of the doctrines of the gospel that have been revealed in Christ, but that they are constantly attentive to obeying them. This suggests two things. First, it implies that a deacon should not serve with a guilty conscience and unconfessed sin. It is very difficult to serve when your conscience condemns you. Without authenticity you lose your boldness to witness and your ability to reach out with abandoned love.

Secondly, it suggests that those who are set aside to serve should be passionate about their spiritual growth. The verb “keeping hold of” is a present participle, suggesting continuous, habitual action. We never fully “arrive” in the Christian life so that we can drift on “auto-pilot.” We need daily exposure to the light of truth in Bible reading and weekly fellowship with one another in corporate worship to keep our hearts pure and cleansed from sinful attitudes. Modeling repentance gives authenticity to leaders’ service. I am always impressed how the apostles did not edit their sins from the canon but kept them front and center in the permanent record of the Scriptures.

I love to garden, and I find the most important aspect to keeping one’s garden lush and beautiful is to pay attention to the condition of the soil. If the soil is neglected and not turned over regularly, it compacts and becomes so dense so that it cannot absorb any nutrients. I don’t come to church on Sunday to learn new information. No, I come

to have my heart and soul cleansed and corrected by the light of the gospel, lest I drift and my heart become hardened.

As in the case of elders, a deacon's character should be the highest priority in the selection criteria.

The second requirement is experience.

### B. Experience

**They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons...A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. (3:10, 12)**

To emphasize the importance of a deacon's reputation, Paul pauses to insist that the requirement of time needed to assess the character of an individual is mandatory. Persons aspiring to the office should not be selected unless they are first "tested" and their character found to be genuine. "Testing" carries with it both the idea of testing and of the subsequent approval. Exactly how this would occur Paul does not say, but it is clear that investigation should be done so that there are no known accusations from the community. And it is clear from vs. 12 that a deacon, like an elder, must be a faithful husband and loving father whose home manifests the love and care that characterized our Lord's relationships during his earthly ministry. If there is a doubt, the bottom line is wait, for time is a friend. Character faults cannot be hidden forever; even good deeds done in secret will one day be made evident (1 Tim 5:24-25). Elders must never be in a hurry to appoint new leaders, even when the congregation seems impatient to have their needs met.

The importance of a deacon's character became even more critical as deacons took on more diverse and responsible roles in the developing church beyond the first century. Beyond the care given to distribute funds to the poor, deacons became traveling missionaries and emissaries on behalf of the elders.

If the bishop tended to be an older man, less on the move as physical vigor declined, deacons seem early to have shouldered the burdens of travel to more or less distant believers. Thus Ignatius had an Ephesian deacon to accompany him, and one from Cilicia. Moreover, he urged deacons, among others, to be sent as ambassadors to the church in Antioch. Such a network, in which deacons become the ears and eyes of the local congregation in the church at large, is a potent agent for unity in faith among believers.<sup>4</sup>

## III. Character Requirements for Women Ministers (1 Tim 3:11)

**In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. (3:11)**

Paul abruptly shifts his concerns from the male deacons to the *gunaikas*, which can be interpreted as "wives" of the deacons, or as "women" ministers. There are arguments for both sides. But to me, the two most compelling are, first, if a wife's character is to come under consideration for the selection of a deacon, why didn't Paul address the "wife" of an elder? And secondly, a glance at other passages reveals that women served as deacons and benefactors in the early days of the church. Paul wrote in Romans: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a *deacon* of the church in Cenchrea; I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the *benefactor* of many people, including me" (Rom 16:1-2). Phoebe was a deacon of Cenchrea, one of the two seaports of Corinth (Acts 18:18). Apparently she had proved herself well there as a "patroness" who generously supported Paul and the church out of her own finances. She was given the honor of officially representing the church in Corinth as the bearer of the letter to the Romans. Quite an honor indeed! Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to be generous in supplying her needs, and to welcome her into their intimate circles of fellowship.

This being the case, they too, like the male deacons must live lives above the ordinary, thus "worthy of respect." Following this summary attribute, Paul lists three specifics. First, they are not to be *diabolos*, "malicious talkers." This was the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the word for "Satan," who destroys lives through false accusations. This evil can invade our fellowships under the guise of prayer requests. Rather than being truly concerned for the individual, we are often more delighted by the fact that we possess a tasty morsel of gossip. As the sage says,

**The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts. (Prov 18:8)**

But, as in the case of Judas, the moment one eats that morsel, he or she becomes the instrument of the devil.

**The perverse stir up dissension, and gossips separate close friends. (Prov 16:28)**

Intimacy that takes years to create can be destroyed by the words of a slanderer. Leaders have a greater potential to become instruments of the devil because they learn much about people that is shared in confidence. Thus it is required that women ministers be zealous to protect the reputation of others and maintain strict confidentiality.

Secondly, like the male deacons, they must also be "temperate," which means they are level headed, free from drunkenness or anything else that might cloud their thinking. And thirdly, they are to be "trustworthy in everything," which implies that the church can count on their reliability to finish in a worthy manner what has been entrusted to them.

On a final note, the lack of any references to married or family life as essential qualifications may also suggest that these women were single and had chosen to devote their lives to the Christ and his church, undistracted by "the affairs of this world," as Paul describes in the Corinthian correspondence:

**An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. (1 Cor 7:34)**

This is an especially appropriate truth to consider on Mother's Day, when we celebrate our mothers who carried us in the womb, gave us birth, and nurtured us at great cost and sacrifice to themselves. In giving honor we acknowledge God's words to Eve, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with pain you will give birth to children" (Gen 3:16). A woman's deepest longings and dreams of motherhood are fraught with pain. Pregnancy is painful, birth is more painful, and following the brief but ecstatic joy of birth, a young mother is consumed with worry and heartache for her children, and even in old age, her grandchildren. And yet for those women who never have the opportunity to raise children, whether they are unmarried, plagued with infertility, or have lost children, the pain is even more severe. But into the midst of this pain, Isaiah spoke a new creative word as he announced the New Covenant:

**Shout for joy, O barren one, you who have borne no child; Break forth into joyful shouting and cry aloud, you who have not travailed;**

**For the sons of the desolate one will be more numerous Than the sons of the married woman," says the LORD. (Isa 54:1)**

In the age of the New Covenant, the divine gift of giving birth and nurturing children is not restricted to the married, nor to a woman's physical children, but is expanded beyond measure, with far greater fertility, through spiritual seed. Jesus never married. He died "desolate," with no children. Yet, Isaiah says of him, "though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring" (Isa 53:10). In contrast to the values of the age, many single women in the early church cap-

tured Isaiah's expansive vision and began to see that their singleness need not be an impediment to their dream of motherhood. In response, they devoted themselves to be servants of the King, and like the Samaritan woman (John 4:39), God used them to give birth and nurture countless spiritual children.

This gift of nurturing is vital to the church, so much so that Paul saw it also as an essential quality for male leaders as they care for the church.

**Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. (1 Thess 2:7-8)**

The fact that Paul describes his care for the Thessalonians in motherly terms suggests that he has learned well from the women whom God had placed into his life. In the letter to the Romans, he gives appreciation to Rufus's mother, who he says, "has been a mother to me" (Rom 16:13). In our church we have many single women whom we should be honoring today as "mothers." Molly Nonnenberg and Cindi Snedaker, for example, have devoted much of their adult years to nurturing and shaping the lives of our high school girls.

Paul closes this section on deacons by commenting on the joyous rewards of a life of service.

#### IV. The Value of the Office (1 Tim 3:13)

**Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. (3:13)**

Those who dedicate their lives to serving the needs of others gain a high standing in the community and a bold confidence in the faith before God. There could hardly be anything more rewarding in this life than the appreciation expressed by those who have been given grace in a time of need. Coupled with the gift of appreciation comes an extensive freedom to speak freely and boldly about Jesus Christ to believers and non-believers alike. This suggests that engaging in good deeds with sacrificial love creates a platform that gives one the right to speak about God with candor and passion.

I'm sure that as Paul was writing this verse, he flashed back to the face of Stephen, one of the men "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" who was chosen to serve as a deacon. Stephen's service gave him such a platform of freedom and boldness that he became fearless in evangelism, especially amongst the Jews. As the Jews began to argue with him, no one "could stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke" (Acts 6:10). When a mob dragged Stephen before the Sanhedrin, they accused him through false witnesses, but he refused to be intimidated: "All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15).

Stephen then preached a sermon to end all sermons, enraging the Sanhedrin:

**But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (Acts 7:55-58)**

As Saul looked on, the last words he heard Stephen speak were similar to those that Jesus spoke from the cross, and they cut him to the quick:

**"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:59-60)**

How important is the work of deacons? Had the apostles not said "no" to this work and delegated it to other gifted individuals, Stephen would never have been equipped. He would never have preached that sermon, and perhaps Paul would not have found Christ.

1 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 280.

2 D. G. Mandelbaum, "Alcohol and Culture," *Current Anthropology* 6 (1985), 18, quoted in Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 281.

3 George Muller, *The Autobiography of George Muller* (New Kensington, Penn.: Whitaker House, 1984), 163.

4 Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 283.