The Role & Responsibilities of Deacons

A Structured Household: Elders, Deacons, with the Saints / Multiple Passages / November 8, 2026

Introduction:

As we continue our series on leadership structure in the church, we come to the role and responsibilities of deacons. This role can be challenging to understand because of how Scripture addresses it. Unlike elders, no details of the function of deacons is provided. The only clear references to deacons are in Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3, which mention deacons with the elders and give their character qualifications. Making things more challenging, deacon is a transliteration of the Greek term "diakonos," meaning a word is created from the Greek instead of translating it, because "diakonos" has a broad meaning and range of uses in Scripture. It is translated "waiter, servant, administrator or minister," and used over one hundred times in the New Testament. Bill Mounce notes how it "describes the work of Timothy (1 Thess 3:2; cf. 1 Tim 4:6), Erastus (Acts 19:22), Apollos (1 Cor 3:5), Paul (Rom 11:13; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 11:23; Col 1:23, 25), Tychicus (Col 4:7), and the apostles (2 Cor 6:4)." And its verb forms are "applied to the ministry of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:5), the apostolic office (Acts 1:17, 25; 2 Cor 4:1; 6:3) as carried out by Paul (Acts 20:24; Rom 11:13; 2 Cor 4:1; 6:3; 11:8; 1 Tim 1:12),… Mark's ministry to Paul (2 Tim 4:11), and the ministry performed by the household of Stephanas (1 Cor 16:15)" (William D. Mounce, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 46: Pastoral Epistles, p. 198). You can see why we have our work cut out for us. Well consider what we can glean from Scripture and church history this morning before digging deeper next Sunday during our class. Let's start with what Philippians 1 and 1 Timothy 3 reveal. Look at Philippians 1:1. Paul writes, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." Note how Paul places deacons with the overseers/elders, distinct from the saints. Now, look at 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Paul says, "Deacons likewise," linking this to the office of overseer, while keeping it distinct. Then, in verse 10, they "serve as deacons," and in verse 13, some will "serve well as deacons." These things, along with having similar character qualifications to elders, confirms this is an official leadership role functioning alongside elders. Their consistent mention with the elders clues us into their role. So, what are deacons? I'm persuaded that,

Deacons are Leading Servants Who Fulfill Assigned Responsibilities to Support the Shepherding Ministry

To see this, let's consider how "diakonos" is used in several passages. First, look at John 2. The servants [diakonos] are instructed by Jesus' mother to follow and carry out His instructions. Second, consider Paul's use of this term for 3 different people in Romans. Look at Romans 13:3-4. Paul says rulers are God's "diakonos," carrying out God's wrath on the wrong doer. Now look at Romans 15:8. Christ became a "diakonos" to reveal something about God, namely that He keeps His promises. Lastly, look at Romans 16:1-2. Phoebe is a "[diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae," a patron who cares for the affairs of others and aids them with their resources. So, in Romans, a "diakonos" carries out the biding of another, reveals the care of the one who sent them, and provides for the other's needs. Look, next, at in Philippians 2:25 & 30. To the Paul says Epaphroditus the churches "messenger and minister [diakonos] to my need" completing their service to Paul. Finally, look at 1 Timothy 4:6. Timothy is called a good "diakonos" of Christ, when carrying out a specific task that benefits the church. From the use of this word in Scripture, I believe we see a "diakonos" is one who serves others, cares for people's needs, carries out assigned plans, and ministers on behalf of those who send them. Now, turn with me to Acts 6:1-6. A passage many believe serves as the model for elders and deacons. Luke writes, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution [diakonia]. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve [diakoneo] tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry [diakonia] of the word.'

And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." Note, first, how verb forms of "diakonos" are used to describe both the work of the Seven and the apostles. This calls for caution in limiting diaconal work to only what we see here. Yet, notice the similarities to what we've seen. The Seven are assigned responsibilities by the apostles to serve others, care for people's needs, and minister on behalf of those who sent them. And what's the reason for their assignment? So the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the Word to carry out their shepherding ministry. Their role served to support the shepherding of God's people and I'm persuaded that's the key to understanding the role of deacons. We'll come back to this in a moment. Consider one more thing about this role before we consider deacon's responsibilities.

The Role of Deacon is Filled by Men & Women

In our class this morning, we shared why we're persuaded Scripture reveals God has designed the role of elders to be filled by men the Spirit has called and qualified for the task. If you missed that, come see me and we'll get you a recording. When it comes to deacons, we are persuaded God has designed this leadership role to be filled by men and women the Spirit has called and qualified for the task. Consider the flow of 1 Timothy 3 with me. Start in 1 Timothy 3:1, where Paul opens with the office of overseer, specifying a leadership role with a specific function. Move down to verse 8, "Deacons likewise," indicates this is an office similar to but distinct from elders. The mirrored character qualifications further support this. Look, now, at verse 11. While translated "their wives likewise" in the ESV, many scholars say it should be translated, "Women likewise." Other versions, like the New American Standard and NIV translate it this way. Let me give four quick reasons why I'm persuaded this is the correct translation, indicating Paul is referring to women who fill the office of deacon. First, there's one word in Greek for "wives" and "women," and a possessive pronoun or the definite article is typically used to indicate "wives." Paul doesn't use either in the Greek here. Second, Paul uses the same terms translated "likewise women" in 1 Timothy 2:9, suggesting we should translate it similarly here. Third, the term "likewise" continues the link to an office, while making a distinction. Finally, the qualifications listed in verse 11 mirror the qualifications in the verses 8-9. Because there was no feminine form of "diakonos" at this time, I'm persuaded Paul sandwiches this between his instructions to deacons in verses 8-10, before returning to a final qualification for the male deacons to indicate he is speaking of women deacons. Two things confirm this for me. I'm persuaded, with many scholars, Phoebe is referred to as a deacon when Paul says she was a "[diakonos] of the church at Cenchreae." Further, early church history speaks of women deacons. We find references to women serving as deacons in the writings of Pliny, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. And Cecilia Robinson notes, "The office of Deaconess … is mentioned by all the leading Greek Fathers and historians of the fourth and fifth centuries. Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, Theodoret and Sozomen all bear testimony to the flourishing condition of the Order. They have preserved to us the personal history of several of its members, and have shown how important was the position they occupied and the service they rendered in the Church" (Ministry of Deaconesses, cited in Mounce, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 46: Pastoral Epistles, p. 212). The Greek in 1 Timothy 3 points to women deacons and evidence points to women serving in this vital leadership role in the early church, showing it is designed by God to be filled by called and qualified men and women. So, deacons are men and women who lead in service, fulfilling assigned responsibilities to support the shepherding ministry. Now, let's consider something to understand about the responsibilities of deacons.

Deacons Responsibilities Include More than Practical Tasks and Mercy Ministry

I believe many overly limit this role to our detriment. Some relegate deacon's responsibilities only to widow care because of Acts 6. Others say they simply "coordinate the church's ministry of mercy….support the sick, infirm, poor, and disabled" and care for the poor and neglected (Robert H. Thune, Gospel Training for

Deacons: Equipping Servant Leaders, p. 51). Some suggest they only help with administrative and practical tasks. I'm persuaded this unwisely diminishes their function in the church. For one, they are mentioned as an office of leadership alongside the elders. Consider also the reason Paul gives their qualifications. Look at 1 Timothy 3:14-15. Paul says, "I am writing these things to you," things including the qualifications for elders and deacons, "so that…you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." Similar to elders, deacons are examples to the flock in their way of life. Like elders, deacons are out in front saying, "follow me as I follow Christ." And look at 1 Timothy 3:9. Paul says, "They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." This implies responsibility in gospel ministry, possibly including instruction and exhortation. Think about this with me. What are Stephen and Philip, part of the Seven, immediately seen doing? Teaching, evangelizing, and healing. Most believe Phoebe's assignment from Paul was to deliver his letter to the Romans, likely reading it for them and possibly helping to explain things to them. This doesn't mean she authoritatively taught them, but her assigned responsibility was likely more than completing a practical task and mercy ministry. I'm persuaded Epaphroditus was a deacon. If he was, Paul called him a fellow worker and he ministered to Paul. Even the Seven in Acts 6, though tasked with meeting practical needs for widows, ultimately met a deeper need of resolving tension and spiritual disunity in the church. Beyond that, it likely took more than seven men to distribute the daily needs for widows in a church well over 3000 by that point. So, they would have led others to fulfill the task. Finally, the testimony of church history shows a variety of ways deacons ministered in the church. Justin Martyr, who lived in the second century, shows them administering communion, sharing scripture, providing instruction, and praying for shut-ins. The Didache, an early church manual, suggests they shared in teaching responsibilities and distributed church funds. Though some caution should be taken because they embody traditional material, third century writings like Hyppolytus' Apostolic Tradition and The Didascalia Apostolorum speak of deacons administering communion and baptism, reading the lectionary, and teaching newly baptized believers. Church History shows deacons serving with the overseers to perform all kinds of ministry to the saints. So, how do we determine the responsibilities of deacons? I'm persuaded there's flexibility in determining how deacons meet the needs of each local church. David Platt suggests five overarching responsibilities, "Deacons are accountable for specific commands…support the ministry of the Word…serve so the elders can lead…lead others so they can serve… and unify the body around the Word" (My summary, David Platt, Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus, pp. 60-61). Robert Thune says, working under and alongside the elders, "They extend the reach of the elders, they assist the work of the elders, they free the minds of the elders" (Robert H. Thune, Gospel Training for Deacons: Equipping Servant Leaders, p. 40). Deacon responsibilities shape around what each church needs to support the shepherding ministry. Yet, we should be careful here. While it appears deacons carry out assigned responsibilities given by the elders, this is not a matter of hierarchy and authority as we see it, but different functions of servant leadership supporting the shepherding of God's people. Deacons are leaders not lackeys. To wrap our time up today, let me suggest two questions everyone can ask in light of this. First,

1) How Can We Value the Ministry of Deacons?

We have a tragic tendency to view acts of service as menial and less important tasks. But look at Jesus words in Mark 10:43-45, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Consider also Paul's call in Philippians 2:3-11, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Christ Jesus, our King, did not consider service to be a menial and less important task. He didn't seek to be worshipped as He deserved. Or boss people around and refuse to go low in service. He emptied Himself and took on the limitations of our humanity, becoming a servant for and to us. He humbled Himself completely to the most debased form of death in service. That is the gospel we cling to. That is the plan of God we must trust in to be saved. Service defines His ransom for us and is one of the greatest representations of Christ's ransoming work. The ministry of deacons exemplifies that as leading servants. We should deeply value this ministry and be delighted if we are called to fill this role. Second, we can ask,

2) How Can We Deploy Deacons in Our Body?

I use the language of deployment intentionally. I once heard someone suggest calling this and eldership a station instead of an office. To be stationed somewhere means to be "put in or assigned to a specified place for a particular purpose, especially a military one." I think that's the imagery of church leadership. In 1 Timothy, Paul emphasizes Christ as King and the concepts of a pillar and buttress connect with the idea of a fortress. Scripture refers to the Christian life as a war with spiritual forces of darkness. These roles are official stations. They are posts, assignments in the Kings guard, to support the truth and care for the sheep. Part of our aim in this series is to have us consider how this station should function at GracePoint. So, we might ask, where do we need fortification? What areas of our ministry need empowered leaders to support the shepherdIng ministry? How can we identify deacons to lead those? What should we do to communicate their leadership, so the body knows who to follow? Remember, in Acts 6 the apostles responded to a need the church identified and asked the church to put forward those full of the Spirit to fill that leadership role. It didn't all originate from the top down. This is a whole church endeavor. We need the body to identify needs and people full of the Spirit to fill them. And we need men and women to step into this vital station to support the shepherding of this flock.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, think on these two main questions and ask God to shape your heart around His desires for faithful deacons. What is He calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of this? Ask the Spirit to provide deacons for our flock. Ask Him to reveal if He is calling you to be one. And pray for these truths to guide us as a church through this season to trust in His good design, adjusting our leadership structure according to it. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?