

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Deacons / Deacons / Romans 16:1–2

Notes

03/15 Romans 16:1-2, "The Ministry of Mercy," Subtitle: How Deacons model the "foot-washing" heart of Christ to the world, Scripture: Isaiah 58:6–12 (Reader only reads) The Big Idea: The office of Deacon is built on integrity, not ability. Key Concept: Using Phoebe as a primary example of a diakonos, we'll explore the breadth of "servant-leadership"—from administrative excellence to radical hospitality and protecting the vulnerable.

Sermon Title: The Ministry of Mercy

Text: Romans 16:1-16

The Main Idea: The office of Deacon is built on integrity, not just ability.

[Introduction]

The Life-giving office of the Deacon.

Two weeks ago, we started in Acts 6 to look at "The Purpose of Peace." We saw that right out of the gate, the early church faced a crisis: physical needs were causing relational friction, and the progress of the Gospel was at risk. So, the church appointed Deacons to be the "shock absorbers"—men and women stepping into the mess to protect the unity of the church and the priority of the Word.

Then, last week, we went to 1 Timothy 3 to look under the hood at the "Profile of the Called." We contrasted the Elder's requirement to teach with the Deacon's requirement to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. We discovered that a Deacon's internal life is the engine for their external service.

That brings us to today. We just heard the powerful words from

Isaiah 58. The prophet calls the people of God to loose the chains of injustice, to share their food with the hungry, and to provide the wanderer with shelter. Isaiah is describing a radical community of mercy within the household of Israel.

But how does that actually play out in the everyday life of the New Testament church?

What does it look like for a Deacon to minister that kind of mercy?

That brings us to our...

Main Idea from our text for today:

The office of Deacon is built on integrity, not ability

Being a deacon does not require having a flashy skill set, a seminary degree, or a microphone. It does require possessing the "foot-washing" heart of Christ and taking it out into a broken world.

Isaiah gave us the prophecy of mercy, but the Apostle Paul gives us the actual names of the people living it out.

To understand Romans 16, we have to understand the first-century world. Back then, there was no public postal service. If you wanted to send a letter, you had to trust a traveler to carry it for you. And if that traveler was going to a new community, they needed a formal "Letter of Recommendation" so the people there would welcome them, trust them, and listen to them.

Paul is writing to a church in Rome that he has never visited, and he is sending them one of the greatest theologically impactful books ever written. Who does he trust to carry it across the sea and explain it to them? He trusts a servant named Phoebe.

When we read Romans 16, it's easy to gloss over the names like it's just the credits rolling at the end of a movie. But this isn't a credits sequence at the end of a movie, mindlessly scrolling every name that has earned the right to be up in lights; this is Paul's letter of recommendation for the ministry of mercy. This is a blueprint. This is Paul showing us what servant-leadership actually looks like on the ground.

While our church recognizes qualified men to hold the specific, ordained *office* of Deacon, the men and women in Romans 16 perfectly model the *heart* of the servant—the *diakonos*—that our officers are called to champion, lead, and emulate. When we talk about the foot-washing heart of Christ, we are looking for men and women who most and increasingly embody three specific marks of mercy found right here in this text.

I. True Servants Leverage Their Own Lives to Protect Others (Romans 16:1-5)

The ministry of mercy isn't just about being nice; it's about stepping into the gap for people who are vulnerable, people who are in need both physically and spiritually, or simply just people who need support and encouragement. It requires a willingness to leverage whatever you have—your home, your time, your strength, your abilities and talents, and even sometimes your wallet and safety—for the sake of the church.

A. They use their resources and influence to pave the way for ministry. (Romans 16:1-2)

- Look at Phoebe. Paul calls her a servant—a *diakonos*—but he also calls her a benefactor, a patron (*prostatis*).
- In the first-century Roman world, society ran on a "patron-client" system. A wealthy or influential patron would legally and financially shield poorer, vulnerable clients. If a client was sued, hungry, or in need - the patron stepped in.
- When Paul calls Phoebe a *prostatis*, he means she wasn't just hosting potlucks. She was using her wealth and social standing as a shield to deflect the blows of a hostile Roman empire away from vulnerable Christians.
- When Phoebe stood up in a Roman courtroom or opened her home to protect the vulnerable, she was living out the ancient command of
- Proverbs 31:8-9: "*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.*"
- True servants don't hoard their influence; they spend it to speak up for those who have no voice, protecting the ministry of the Word and the people of God.

B. They courageously risk their own security to create a safe harbor for the Gospel (Romans 16:3-5)

- Paul points to Priscilla and Aquila, noting in verse 4: "**They risked their lives for me.**" * The Greek word Paul uses here is *hypotithēmi* (hoo-pot-ith'-ay-mee). It literally translates to "lay down under." It was an idiom used for someone placing their own neck on the executioner's block in place of someone else.
- To understand this kind of risky hospitality, think of Corrie ten

Boom during World War II. Her family used their watchmaking shop and home as a safe harbor for Jewish people escaping the Nazi regime. They built "The Hiding Place." Opening your door to the vulnerable wasn't just "being neighborly"; it was a literal risk of their own necks.

- Priscilla and Aquila didn't just endure some mild inconvenience. True servant-leaders don't just set the table; they stand guard.

The character of a deacon in standing guard, isn't just a momentary calling, it is a life-long lived, long-haul endeavor on behalf of the people of God, even when crashing into something that was just around the corner, something unseen.

II. True Servants Embrace the Unseen Grind (Romans 16:6, 12)

If you want to know what a Deacon looks like, look for the people with calloused hands, both physically and spiritually.

The office is built on integrity, not flashy abilities. It's built on the willingness to do the heavy lifting when nobody is clapping.

A. They willingly pour themselves out in exhausting work behind the scenes. (Romans 16:6), even when no one is looking.

- In verse 6, Paul simply says, "Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you." * He doesn't list a theological degree or public speaking skills; he highlights her sweat. The Greek word for "worked hard" (kopiaō) implies toil to the point of exhaustion.

- The foot-washing heart of Christ is often found in the exhausting, unseen work of simply showing up to meet the needs of others, in the moment, over and over again, and sometimes for the long-haul.

B. They commit to the steady, unglamorous labor that keeps the church moving forward (Romans 16:12)

- Paul goes on to list Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis—women who "work hard in the Lord." These are the folks who push the brooms, change the lights, who set up the chairs, who visit the hospital rooms at 2:00 AM.
- In the 17th century, a monk named Brother Lawrence understood this unseen grind perfectly. His assignment in the monastery wasn't to preach to thousands; it was to wash the massive, greasy pots and pans.
- Yet, in that exhausting, unglamorous grind, he wrote: "The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen... I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."
- Brother Lawrence and these women in Romans 16 prove that you don't need a microphone to do holy work. A towel, a basin, or a soapy pot is enough.
- How do you keep setting up the chairs and visiting the hospital rooms when nobody is clapping? You do it because you understand...

Colossians 3:23 NASB95

²³ Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,

- They aren't looking for a microphone because they know their audience is an audience of One. That steady, everyday grind is the engine that keeps the church moving forward.

III. True Servants Bear the Scars of Faithfulness (Romans 16:7-10)

Mercy ministry (being a deacon) can be messy, and when you get involved in the brokenness of people's lives, you are going to pick up some scars.

A true servant-leader doesn't run when the fire gets hot.

A. They step into the trenches to help the broken bear their burdens (Romans 16:7)

- Look at Andronicus and Junia in verse 7. Paul calls them his "fellow prisoners." But the Greek word here isn't the standard word for someone sitting in a jail cell.
- The word is *synekchmalōtos* (soon-aikh-mal'-o-tos), which literally translates to "fellow captives taken by the spear" or "fellow prisoners of war."
- Paul doesn't just call them his cellmates; he calls them his fellow Prisoners of War.

Mercy ministry is spiritual warfare

- When Deacons step into the messes of people's lives—the brokenness, the poverty, the relational friction—they are taking spear hits on the front lines of a war for the souls of our congregation.

It is for this very act that the Apostle Paul emphatically commands us all to...

Ephesians 6:10–11 NASB95

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

Ephesians 6:12 NASB95

¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual *forces* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

Mercy ministry is spiritual warfare. Those who should be recognized for the office of Deacon should be those who best exemplify the quality of being reading, willing, and actively stepping into the brokenness of others, into the carnage of spiritual warfare for the sake of others; to rescue them from the fox-holes of spiritual battle to bring them to safety and remind them that they are not alone.

This isn't something that is done occasionally or eventually. Like we saw in 1 Tim. 3 last week, this is something that they take soberly. It is something that they prepare for, plan for, and ready themselves to do. This is something that they take upon themselves regularly and without reserve.

B. They lead from a deep, tested fidelity to Christ rather than a flashy skill set (Romans 16:9-10)

- In verses 9 and 10, Paul greets Urbanus, his "co-worker," and Apelles, whose "fidelity to Christ has stood the test." *
- The Greek word for "stood the test" is *dokimos* (dok'-ee-mos).
- The great theologian Donald Barnhouse, who pastored Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, gives us a perfect picture

of this word.

- Barnhouse explained that in the ancient world, coins were made of soft metal. Dishonest people would shave the edges off the coins to steal the silver, so laws were passed to stop this practice.
- He pointed out that a *dokimos* was a man of high integrity—a money changer who refused counterfeit or shaved-down money and only circulated genuine, full-weighted coins.
- The Apostle Peter talked about this exact same testing in 1 Peter 1:7. He said that trials come so that

"the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor." (1 Pet. 1:7)

- Why is the office of Deacon built on integrity and not ability? Because God isn't looking for men who have shaved down their character or cut corners on their integrity behind closed doors, sometimes, just to get things done. He is looking for genuine, full-weighted men whose faith is willing to and have survived stepping into the fire. He is looking for men whose internal life has not been compromised, so their external service can change the world.

[Conclusion]

Before we conclude this discussion about the official office of Deacon, I want to speak directly to any weary servant in the room today, deacon or not.

Some of you are living out the reality of verse 12 right now, even without any office or position, maybe just in your personal and spiritual life.

You are exhausted. You are deep in the unseen grind—maybe it's caring for an aging parent, maybe it's raising toddlers and trying to keep your family anchored, or maybe it's just showing up to a thankless job every day with quiet, tested integrity. You might feel invisible. You might feel like nobody is clapping for the heavy lifting you do.

I want you to look at, I want you to sincerely consider those named by Paul in Romans 16. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God literally stopped the great Apostle Paul to write down the names of everyday, ordinary people who simply "worked hard." Yes, this may have been a normal practice in the day to give credentials to the deliverer of the letter, but the Holy Spirit seems to have more purpose for us than just the practical of the day and culture during when this was written. In the mentioning of these names, Paul memorialized their sweat.

God sees your unseen grind. Often, the most meaning service is that which is often unseen by others around you, but it is never unseen by the Lord. Heaven notices when you pick up the towel and the basin in your own home, in your workplace, and in your neighborhood. Your quiet faithfulness matters deeply to the heart of God.

That is the culture of mercy that we want to saturate our entire church family. We need a culture in God's church, where the towel and the basin are prized far above the microphone.

And from that culture, we need the church to recognize and recommend (nominate) men who step up into this culture and who are willing to step into the ordained office of Deacon We need men to step up, possessing and embracing this kind of tested, *dokimos* integrity. As you pray over who to nominate for this office, ask yourself: Who is already doing the unseen grind?

Who is already acting as a shock absorber for the vulnerable?
Which men best emulate and live out this priority of service and support for God's people, the church?

I want to leave you with one final thought as we prepare our hearts for next week.

Sometimes, it is so easy to look at the work of a servant—setting up the chairs, making the hospital visits, balancing the budget, bringing the meals—and reduce it down to simply "doing church chores." We look at it as mere administrative upkeep.

But next Sunday, we are going to wrap up our Deacon series with a message titled, "The Reward of the Servant," and we are going to shatter that misconception. We are going to look at Matthew 25 and John 13 to see the true spiritual weight of this office. We will discover the staggering, beautiful truth — that ministering mercy to the "least of these" is not a church chore; it is ministering to Christ Himself.

Next week, we are going to shift our eyes from the servants of the church directly to Jesus, the Ultimate Servant, preparing our hearts for the road to Easter.

But until then, consider the following five questions that might help you drive home the biblical values from this passage, not just so that you recognize men who already strive to live this out in their own lives, but so that you can consider whether you yourself do:

1. Acknowledge the Grind — what does it look like in your life?

In the conclusion of this week's message, we talked about the

"unseen grind"—the everyday, exhausting work of caring for aging parents, raising kids, or showing up to a thankless job. What does the "unseen grind" look like in your life right now?

1. Acknowledge the Grind — what does it look like in your life?

2. Know that God Sees — God "memorializes your sweat" when no one else does

Romans 16 is essentially a list of everyday people whose quiet, exhausting work was recognized by the Holy Spirit. How does it change your perspective on your daily tasks to know that God literally "memorializes your sweat" and sees the heavy lifting you do when nobody is clapping?

1. Acknowledge the Grind — what does it look like in your life?

2. Know that God Sees — God "memorializes your sweat" when no one else does

3. Prize the Towel over the Microphone — what should I do to prize the towel?

We were challenged to build a church culture where "the towel and the basin are prized far above the microphone." In a world that constantly rewards the flashy and the loud, how can we actively prize and celebrate quiet servanthood in our own homes, workplaces, and right here in this small group?

1. Acknowledge the Grind — what does it look like in your life?

2. Know that God Sees — God "memorializes your sweat" when no one else does

3. Prize the Towel over the Microphone — what should I do to prize the towel?

4. Bear the Scars Together — how can you join with others to help carry the weight while they help carry yours?

This message mentioned that true servants act as "shock absorbers" and step into the trenches to bear the burdens of the broken. When you are feeling invisible or exhausted in your own trenches, how can you join with others to better support one another and help carry that weight?

1. Acknowledge the Grind — what does it look like in your life?

2. Know that God Sees — God “memorializes your sweat” when no one else does

3. Prize the Towel over the Microphone — what should I do to prize the towel?

4. Bear the Scars Together — how can you join with others to help carry the weight while they help carry yours?

5. Put Ministry in Action — notice others and let them know you see what God sees

Think about the people in our church family or your personal life. Who is someone you know that is currently doing the heavy lifting behind the scenes with quiet, tested integrity? What is one practical way you can reach out and encourage them this week?

We need your help.

We need you to help us bear the heat of the spiritual battle in

the church and in our community.

We need to help you bear the same.

We need you to take note of those who best embody this calling of God for His church

We need you to pick up a form from the table in the back or print it from your emails, fill it out, and submit it to an usher or place in the offering plate, as we consider who in God's church is striving to live this out in their own lives already.

Most importantly, we need you, together with all of us, to consider how we are and ought to be manifesting this in our own lives, in God's church.

We will never become what God wants us to be in isolation. Isolational Christianity is not what God designed and ordained as the body of Christ. We must show up for each other as we show up for the Lord.

Meaningful service is often unseen by those we actually service, but it is always seen by the Lord — Heaven sees