

Christ-Like Deacons

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if you were with us last Sunday evening, you'll know that we thought a wee bit about leadership in the church. We saw the profile of the kind of leader that God wants in his church, Christ-like elders. And I want to start by recognizing this evening that this passage tonight is, in fact, very similar. So if you weren't here last week, that is not a problem. Those of you who were here last week, it's a bit of a risky thing maybe to say at the start of a sermon that you might have already heard some of this. But look at how Paul begins in verse 8. He introduces these verses in the same way. In the same way. Now, the temptation for a preacher at this point is to try and point out the differences in this passage from the last passage to show the contrasts to save you all falling asleep.

I trust you won't. I trust that God's word is always alive and speaking. But that's often how these two passages are handled, aren't they? Two offices, two roles, elders, deacons. Now, how are they different? But Paul doesn't invite us, does he, to spot the difference? He invites us to spot the similarity. The question we come to these verses with is surely, what then is the same about this picture of deacons as compared with his picture of elders? Because I guess a bit like if we are playing spot the difference, if we're searching hard for differences, we're going to miss what is right in front of our faces, which is that the two pictures are basically the same. As with last week, Paul's focus is on character, moral qualities, Christlikeness.

This is not a list of tasks, is it, that deacons must do. It's a profile of who a deacon must be, not only again in church life, but at home, at work, and in every sphere. This is Paul's call then for Christlike deacons. And so as we did last time, we'll spend some time thinking about what a deacon is, so we know what it is we're talking about, and then move on to Paul's focus, which is who is a deacon?

Firstly then, what is a deacon? A good question. It's the kind of word, isn't it, that most people outside of the church probably don't have a clue what that word means. Perhaps some of us in the church, what is a deacon? Well, our word deacon, it comes straight from the New Testament. The Greek word diakonos, meaning servant. So again, it's just a word that we've pinched straight out of the New Testament. And at minimum then, we could say a deacon is a servant, someone who serves.

But then, perhaps we wonder, well, isn't that all of us? Are we not all servants of Christ? Servants in his church, in Jesus' teaching? This is what all of his followers are to be. Whoever would be great among you, he says, must be your diakonos, your servant. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. And so it's true, we are all servants of Christ if we are followers of him who came to serve. But that doesn't make us all deacons in this technical sense. Paul begins to use this word in more specific ways for specific roles. So for example, Paul's happy to call himself a diakonos of Christ or the gospel, which is often translated in our Bibles, minister.

[4 : 08] Minister is the same word. He counts himself a servant of the word. But he also uses the word servant in a technical sense to describe someone who is set apart for service, set apart to be a servant with a capital S, if you like, a distinct role or office in the church. And that's what these verses are about, deacons in a technical sense. The Bible teaches there are basically two offices in the church. Some would say there are actually two and a half. I'll leave you in suspense to see what that is when we get there. But for our purposes tonight, Paul's setting out qualifications for two officers, elders and now deacons. And in the same way that elders are set apart to oversee and under-shepherd the church under Christ, well, deacons are set apart to serve him in certain ways in the church. So then what is a deacon? What does it mean to be a deacon? Well, the simple way to divide it up, and traditionally this is how it's done, is to say that elders are set apart for the spiritual service of the church, and deacons set apart for the practical service of the church. And while we're going to see that doesn't get us all the way, it does get us some of the way. We read earlier from Acts chapter 6 in our service about the very first deacons, seven men set apart by the laying on of hands and by prayer to serve the practical needs of the fledgling church. Now the setting is a division is flared up. It's a little bit complicated as to who it actually is, but basically this division is over who is getting served first and most. The Hebrew speakers think that, well, the Greek speakers think that their widows are overlooked in this daily distribution. So widows in the first century, without a husband, without a father, wouldn't probably have had a steady source of income. So the church provided for widows in that position in the church. And the Greek-speaking Jewish Christian widows in the church feel overlooked as the distribution is happening. They think that the Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christian widows are being shown favoritism. Now we're not told whether that was true, but the apostles see the problem behind the problem, which is the start of a terrible division in the church. If they don't find a way to serve these needs in a way that is agreeable to everyone, well, the church will soon split down this kind of ethnic divide. And so they get the congregation to nominate seven men who aren't then to take on this responsibility for these needs because they say it is not right or not best that we should give up serving, preaching the word of God to serve tables. Now they do this because the apostles, they were uncompromising in their devotion, their calling to be servants of the word, to be praying, to be preaching, to give themselves completely to that work. Now to be clear, they're not saying that serving food was beneath them or that they'd never wiped down a dirty table. It's a question of priorities.

They're saying it's not best for us to take this on and be distracted or taken away from the work of preaching the word. Instead, they say, let's get seven other guys involved who can devote themselves to this very practical service so that prayer and preaching isn't sidelined but kept central to the life of the church. And so that is where the first deacons really come in. This precedent was set by the apostles in Acts chapter 6 that practical or material or financial things that could be delegated to others to handle in a wise and a godly way should be delegated to deacons, men set apart, qualified for that role.

I guess that kind of practical side to the work of deacons is reflected, isn't it? In the first few qualifications Paul sets out in verse 8, they're not to-dos, are they? But they reflect a practicality that they're to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, not pursuing dishonest gain.

Those are certainly qualities that you would want in people who are holding the purse strings of the church, who are to be ready to serve the church in really practical ways. So these are men who are set apart to support the preaching of the word through their practical servants. And that's basically how we here at Bon Accord operate, how much of the Free Church of Scotland operates. As I said last Sunday, if you're here visiting with us, if you're here from another church, this is not the main thing to know about how our church operates. But it's good to know why we do what we do, how it works, where it comes from.

At Bon Accord, we have eight deacons. When they meet together, they are the deacons' court, and they are supported very closely by a mini finance committee of our two treasurers. And you'll see these people serving our church family in all kinds of ways. Prime example, we are sitting in a building that is lighted and heated. They keep the building up and running, which is a brilliant service to the gospel and the church, stretching all the way to looking after the AV, often operating at the AV week by week, looking after the church finances, the giving of the church family. The list goes on and on and on, often behind the scenes. Our deacons deserve our real thanks and appreciation. But one way I want to highlight that the deacons serve the church and want to serve the church is in organizing support for anyone in the congregation with any kind of practical or material needs. This is what we saw in Acts 6, isn't it? A very practical need. And a couple of weeks ago, David, one of our deacons, said at our AGM, and I'll say it again here, that this is one of the items that is on the agenda every single month when the deacons meet. Practical help for anyone in the congregation. And so I highlight that as part of the work of the deacons, the legitimate service, to encourage you really to share those practical needs with these guys, to help them to help you. If you think that they could help in a practical or material way, we want to know about it. It's very, very biblical, isn't it, for deacons to organize that kind of support for the church family. Now that's part of the reason why nearly every life group has a deacon as part of the pastoral care team. The idea is that we want the whole life of our church, the whole congregation covered not only by an elder, but also by a deacon. You can get to know the people in that group, the needs in that group, who can feed back then to the deacon's court, or think of ways that those needs can be met. Who else might be involved? You know, as with the church in Jerusalem, it would be really irresponsible of us as a church to overlook the needs of our church family. Not only because we're called to love, to care for and to serve one another, but of course, because of the bitterness and the division, the resentment that can build up when needs are overlooked.

[12 : 45] And that can really pull the spotlight away from Christ and the gospel, take us off mission as a church. And that can really help us to help us to help us. And that's what we're going to do.

Interesting on that note, isn't it? That when the deacons did this work, served the church in these really practical, hands-on, pragmatic ways, well, the impact was, quote, that the word of God continued to increase. And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith because their practical service of the needs of the saints, serving tables, freed up the gospel to go out to grow. It brightened the witness of the church so that even the opponents of the church, the priests, could see that the gospel and God was at work in the life of the church of Jesus Christ. All that to say, the deacons are set apart to serve ye, to serve ye. They won't be the only ones, of course. As I say, we are still all servants, all called to love, to serve, to care for one another. And so while deacons are very active in our church, they might not be the only ones who serve you. They won't necessarily do all the things that I've described, but they're here to make sure that those things are being done, whether by themselves or others as part of teams.

So one application, I guess, to the whole church, this isn't just about deacons, is it? It's about our whole church life. And one application then is to get involved where you can.

If the deacons ask for you to support them in some way or work with them, do that enthusiastically, throw yourself into it. You count it an opportunity to serve alongside of them, even if you're not able to, or be willing to be asked to serve in these ways. Because our deacons want to make sure our church is served well and to involve the whole church in that service of our family. So that's an overview then of what a deacon is. There's much more that could be said. But to cut it short, servants set apart then in the household of God to handle the practical running, the care of the church family.

And as I say, our deacons do do that very well. Behind the scenes, they serve so willingly, uncomplainingly, and we should be so thankful for them. But, but, that is not all that deacons are set apart for. Practical service is a key part of being a deacon. But we'd be wrong to think that the deacons are simply kind of church handymen. Now, why do I say that? Well, it's because of our second question, who a deacon is. Who is a deacon? Now, this is where our kind of simple and clear-cut division between elders being kind of spiritual and deacons being practical begins to fall apart. Because if we read the qualifications Paul lays out, well, what do we notice about them? Okay, how many practical qualifications does a deacon need to be a deacon? How much skill or experience or professional background does a deacon need to be a deacon? Well, I can't see any. I don't count any of those practical boxes to tick. All of the qualifications are, like the elders, spiritual and moral. Okay, this is all to do with Christian character, Christ-likeness generally, and in these specific ways. As I pointed out before, Paul's kind of stress is on how similar the character of elders and deacons should be. In fact, it goes far as to say that I can't see any distinction between the character of an elder and that of a deacon in these verses. Sometimes it's pointed out that the only real difference is the qualification for an elder to be able to teach, but clearly that doesn't rule out any kind of spiritual involvement, qualification, or service. Notice what Paul says in verse 9 about deacons that they must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

[17 : 41] So even if deacons don't have the responsibility for public teaching in small group settings, something like that, well, they should be men of deep conviction with a mature grasp of the Bible's teaching. You often in churches, being a deacon is seen as almost being kind of part of an incubator for men with potential. We'll see how they get on. If they're deacons, a testing ground, if you like, see if they're a good deacon. Maybe they'll be a good elder. But notice that Paul expects those ordained as deacons already to be mature, verse 9, and already to be tried and tested, verse 10. See that?

They must first be tested. And then if there's nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. So again, perhaps Paul's view of what a deacon is, is higher than we sometimes see it.

There's nothing in our Bibles that says that an elder must be a deacon first. But Paul does say that both elders and deacons need to be tried and tested before being set apart for the office. And so the question is then, brothers and sisters, why would a servant of purely practical needs need such high spiritual qualifications and seemingly so few practical qualifications? Well, going back to the only real example that we have in scripture of deacons at work, I think it's really obvious why that is. The apostles are clear from the outset that the church is to look in the first instance, not for the most skillful or efficient or organized men, but, quote, men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, full of the spirit and of wisdom. And very shortly after this, we find these deacons witnessing to Christ in very public and very powerful ways. The very next thing that happens in Acts, if we read on in chapter 7, 6, 7, is that one of those seven, Stephen, is arrested because his opponents, quote, could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he was speaking. He then preaches one of the most significant sermons ever preached, and he is stoned to death for it. And get this, it is the way that Stephen dies for his testimony to Christ that is the starting pistol for the gospel to go out of the city and into the country, out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria.

And it's one of those guys, Philip, again, one of the seven, a deacon, he becomes the very first person to share the gospel of Christ with someone who isn't Jewish, the Ethiopian eunuch. He's out in the country, this guy's trying to make sense of Isaiah chapter 53. And we read of Philip that he was sent out there to tell him that beginning with the scripture, the good news of Jesus. And so here's a surprise, it's not the apostles, but the very first deacons who pushed the gospel out of Jerusalem and are the first to take it to the ends of the earth. The first deacons were not only practically helpful, they were also passionate evangelists. They loved Christ dearly. They spoke about him even to the point of death. They gave their lives for him. They loved sharing and speaking of him openly whenever they had opportunity. They were men filled with the Spirit who spoke the word.

And so much so that some of the guys who were at the Westminster Assembly back in the 17th century, these are the guys who wrote our confession of faith, our subordinate standard as a church.

[21 : 51] Some people there argued actually that the office of a deacon was the equivalent of being a minister in training or an assistant to the minister. Now to set our deacons at ease, I think that is probably going a bit too far, but it does help us see that it's not at all obvious from scripture that a deacon should just stick to the practical running of the church.

It's a requirement and a precedent that deacons be men who are full of the Spirit and wisdom. So it's essentially a spiritual office, not a practical office. It was filled by men like Stephen and Philip, men who we would probably have down if they were here today as elders. But perhaps that is more a reflection of how historically we have perhaps underestimated and downgraded the office of deacons.

And so is that spiritual maturity what we look for in our deacons? Is that spiritual service what we ask of our deacons? I ask those questions not because we're getting ready to elect new deacons right now, but let's not forget this until the next time we need to do that. But who a deacon is, is more important than what a deacon does. Who a deacon is, is more important than what a deacon does. We value our deacons so much, don't we? They serve tirelessly, often thanklessly. So do then pray for their hearts.

Brothers and sisters, no less than you do your elders. Okay, think of the elder, the deacon in your life group and commit them to God in prayer by name. Pray for their godliness and character, their witness to the church and the community. And if you are a deacon or you aspire to be a deacon, well make sure you see your role through a New Testament lens. It's easy, isn't it, for all of us in whatever role or position in life to kind of default to the norm, the lowest common denominator. But brothers, don't let the practical tasks override your spiritual calling and responsibility and service in and out of the church. Be a Stephen, be a Philip, wait on tables and witness to Christ. And of course, the deacons are not the only ones who are going to be doing that. I've already said part of their role is getting others involved in service. And some of those people, of course, of course, are the women of the church. And it's worth pointing this out specifically because, well, Paul mentions it specifically, doesn't he, in verse 11. In the same way, the women. Now, this is a verse that faithful

Christians and churches disagree on. Some see this as Paul speaking about women, for example, who were deacons. Now, personally, I actually think that would be a strange way for him to do that. Surely, if these women were deacons, he wouldn't have called them the women, but rather deacons or deaconesses. And surely they would have the same qualifications as the deacons, not their own kind of specifically targeted verse.

[25 : 41] Zooming then out to the rest of the Bible, we're looking for maybe other places where we don't really have a clear precedent for women deacons in Scripture. Back in Acts, it's striking. It's actually really striking that the apostles asked for seven men, even though the need at hand was to serve the widows. So it would have been a really obvious way, wouldn't it, to have ordained women as deacons in that role. It wouldn't have seemed odd or out of place. And I can't believe for a minute that it was because there were no women who were qualified or that there were no women who were willing. No, it's because the apostles asked for men to do it. People sometimes point out Phoebe in Romans 16, Paul calls her a diakonos of the church. And so we wonder, perhaps, was she a deaconess?

But it's not clear that Paul is using that word there in the technical sense. She was clearly a remarkable servant of the church. That doesn't necessarily make her a deaconess in that technical sense. And given that she's the only woman who is called a diakonos, I personally would be very reluctant to build a case for women deacons on that evidence. Instead, good handling of scripture suggests that we should turn to the passages that teach us about deacons, to tell us who a deacon is.

And in our passage in verse 12, Paul goes on to tell us a deacon must be faithful to his wife, or again, a one woman man, which does make it hard, doesn't it, to imagine that he's speaking about women deacons here.

Now, there are faithful churches who have women deacons. It's not an issue that we need to fall out over. But I say that because it's here in the passage. And I think the free church is right to say that biblically, the role of a deacon is reserved for qualified men. But what then is verse 11 actually doing here, if it's not doing that? Well, it could be talking about women who were involved in the diaconal work or partnered closely with the deacons in that work. You think of a Phoebe, for example, or in Acts chapter 9, we read about Dorcas. We read, she was always doing good and helping the poor.

In our setting, maybe the most obvious examples of women who partner with the deacons would be Christine in her role as a treasurer or Judy as our administrator. Both women fit this description brilliantly, don't they? Women who are worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything. Every church has women who use their gifts to work closely with the deacons in ways that hugely benefit both the deacons' core and the wider church.

[28 : 53] It's so clear, isn't it, from these verses and other places in Scripture that women and men have always partnered to serve the church, both practically, financially, and spiritually.

Now, the word woman in verse 11 can also mean wife. And so another possibility is that Paul could be talking here about deacons' wives. And that could make sense too, looking at the character he describes.

Diaconal work sometimes involves very sensitive service, helping with financial needs, for example. And so if people were worried perhaps that those things could be gossiped about, talked about maliciously, that those things might not be entrusted to someone at home, well, the service of the deacons is going to be limited if people are not willing to come with their needs. All this to say then that whether he's speaking about women involved in this work or the wives of deacons, Paul plainly expects that women will be involved in this service of the church, involved working with the deacons. And sisters, your Christ-like character matters as much as your brother's does. In character, Christ-like character in your service.

And so while we shouldn't try to connect dots that the Bible doesn't connect, neither should we draw boundaries where the Bible doesn't draw boundaries. Men and women can and should partner together in service. The deacons should draw on the character and the gifts of the whole church, men and women together to meet the church's needs. And Paul's finishes, he finishes on that note with a final encouragement. You see that in verse 13. He says, those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. Serving like the master, he says, serving with the master, strengthens our faith. You'll be talking in the church about opportunities to serve. I don't know any other family where service is seen as an opportunity rather than a chore.

But when we say that, an opportunity for what? Well, Paul would say an opportunity to grow in Christ and grow in our faith in Christ. You sometimes be here at teaching that speaks of our good works or our changed lives as something that we do out of our gratitude to God. If our service was something that we kind of gave back to him out of our thankfulness. Now, that's not a wrong motive. Of course, it's not. But really, his grace is deeper than that, friends. Because it is only thanks to his work in us that we have good works to do at all. Our service isn't something we give back to God. There's just more evidence of his gracious work in us making us more like his son inside and out. There are good works that God has prepared beforehand that we might walk in them. And so, says Paul, when we serve well, it is evidence that God is at work in us. And seeing that, well, we gain great assurance in our faith in Christ. Our roots grow deeper down into Christ as we see the fruits of our union with him ripening, growing in our faith, growing in our faith, growing in our faith, growing in our faith. And as we grow ever more deeply into him, well, so we grow ever more fully like him. He who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Let's pray for that together now. Let's pray.

[33 : 05] God, our Father, how we thank you once again for Christ, he who came, not that we would serve him, but that he would serve us. Not to demand our lives be given to him, but to freely give his life that we might live. Father, how we thank you for your grace towards us in him, that as you have brought us to him and drawn our hearts to him, that you have made the service of him not a chore or a duty, but a choice and an opportunity. And Father, we pray for each of us that we would grow to grasp that opportunity to serve. Father, we pray that you would give us willing hearts that love to care for one another and work together for your glory and the gospel and for the practical needs of our church.

Father, we thank you for each and every one who does that. Lord, those who clean this building, those who look after the lighting, the heating, those who look after the finances of our church.

Lord, so many things in unseen ways. But Father, your word assures us that you see what is done in secret. Father, we thank you that you bless us in our service. Lord, we pray for our deacons in particular and that you would encourage them and strengthen them in their service. Lord, we pray that you would grant them to grow in grace and in godliness, that they would walk closely to Christ, that they would indeed have a deep grasp of the deep truths of the faith. And Lord, that they would serve with great spirit and wisdom. Lord, we thank you for all the gifts, the many gifts that you have given them. I pray that you would bless them richly as they use them. Lord, this we pray in Jesus name. Amen.