

Deacons

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 03 December 2023

Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0 : 0 0] Bibles to two places, both in the New Testament. The first place is Acts chapter 6. So if you've got a hard copy Bible in your hands, you're going to need two fingers here. But Acts chapter 6, verse 1, and then the other place is 1 Timothy 3, and verse 8 to 13. I don't know how you put two fingers in if you've got it on your phone, but whatever you have to do, you can do that. Acts chapter 6 and verse 1 to 7 is where we're going to start this morning.

Luke writes the book of Acts, and he writes this, he says, 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. 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. Brothers and sisters, choose men from among you who are full of the Spirit, who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Hormonais, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. And so the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Then flip over to 1 Timothy chapter 3. 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 8.

Apostle Paul writes 1 Timothy and he says, verse 8, 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. They must first be tested, and then if there's nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study together this morning. Our gracious God and our King, we ask for mercy this morning.

We ask for mercy that as we open up your Word, as we look into it, as we read this text, as we contemplate this text, as we meditate upon it, you would reveal truth to us. Truth that we can't find anywhere else, because it is truth that comes from your Word and is empowered by your Spirit.

Lord, we want to know you. We want to know your ways, because we want to conform our lives to those patterns, because we know that in doing so, we find goodness and truth and beauty. Make us like your Son, Jesus, we pray. Help us. Let your Spirit work now as we study, and we ask us all for Christ's sake and His glory. Amen.

[3 : 27] So we close off our series, or at least the bulk of our series for this year, Jesus Loves the Church, where we've been doing kind of a doctrine of the church. What does the Bible actually say about what a healthy biblical church looks like? And this is week 11, actually, in this. We've done a bunch of different things. Last two sermons, we've been looking at elders, and now we close off by looking at deacons. Now, you'll remember, if you cast your mind back, we said, basically, if you look at the New Testament, it seems like there are two, what we might call, ordinary and perpetual offices in the church, like official positions in the church. We've got all sorts of different names in the church, like evangelists, prophets, apostles, pastors, teachers, elders, deacons. Which ones should we still have today? Well, what are we supposed to have today? What do we know we're supposed to have today? And we've tried to make the case, and I hope we've made it convincingly, that we're supposed to have elders and deacons operative in the church today. And we talked about elders, now we're going to talk about that specific office of deacon. And we're going to focus on those two passages we just read, so Acts 6, 1-7, and 1 Timothy 3, 8-13. I want us to start at the very beginning, the Acts passage first, and then we'll kind of move into the 1 Timothy 3 passage. But that Acts 6 passage, those first seven verses, many kind of Presbyterian, Reformed theologians look at this passage, and they go, this choosing of the seven that takes place, this is the foundational passage in the Bible for the establishment of the office of deacon. Now, a few Reformed scholars are a little bit more circumspect, and they would say, well, you know, if you look at it, the word deacon's not actually in there anywhere in the passage, nor is the word office in that passage. But there certainly are principles here that seem to undergird what will later on become the official office of deacon in the New Testament. And we know from passages later on that we've looked at in previous sermons that there is a clear office later on in the New Testament called deacon. The question, though, is Acts 6 the clear beginning of that office? Now, me personally, I tend to take sort of a,

I'm a wimp, so I take a bit of a mediating view here between those who say Acts 6 is clearly about the establishment of the office of the deacon, and those who say, well, maybe not, but there are some principles here for later understanding of the office of deacon. I'm in between. I think this is something of the beginning of the office of deacon. I think these are kind of, if you like, proto-deacons being set up here, and that the office then starts to get fleshed out more in the New Testament church as we go along, so that it's much more structured down the line in terms of governance. So what do we learn from this passage and then from the 1 Timothy 3 passage? Six things I want you to see this morning.

I saw a shock in some of your eyes when I said six points this morning, because you're like, Stephen, you've only got two or three at most. Six this morning, but don't worry, we'll get through them all. Six things. Number one, deaconal work is about balance. Deaconal work is about balance.

The need for deacons arose partly in response to the need for balance in the material care of people with the ongoing preaching of the Word of God. So look down at verse 1 of chapter 6 of Acts.

It says, 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. So this is very early on in the early church, and the early church is growing, and it's growing rapidly at this point through the preaching of the apostles. Huge numbers of Jews in and around the city of Jerusalem are coming to faith, and it's an incredible time. It's a time of revival. It's an amazing time, like where they're standing room only in the church, but it creates a significant problem. How do we meet everybody's needs? This is a needy time. How do we meet everybody's needs? And the problem comes to the fore when a dispute breaks out between two sets of these early Christians. At that time in Jerusalem, there were Jews who were Greek-speaking as a result of the diaspora in the Eastern Mediterranean, and there were Jews who were Hebrew-speaking. And a dispute breaks out between their two sets of respective widows. Now just a comment on widows here in the New

[7 : 51] Testament. You'll notice if you read across the whole of the New Testament, there is a lot of talk of widows. In fact, it almost kind of seems like the church's dominant mercy ministry or practical ministry was geared towards widows in the New Testament era. And that, I think, is really commentary on the society of the time. To be a widow in the first century was to be in an especially vulnerable situation. The kind of employment options that we have available to women today just were not there in that society. And so losing your spouse was like a one-way ticket to poverty in the first century. So right from the very get-go then, we see the church mobilizing here. We see the early church meeting this particular material need. And it's very clear that there was, right from the very beginning, some sort of daily distribution, food distribution to the widows. And I think it's reasonable to think that this distribution would have gone to other people as well, other marginalized, vulnerable people, because we know even back in Acts chapter 2, right at the very beginning, after the preaching of Pentecost, when you have this huge influx of Christians, we're told straight away there with that first wave of converts that when the believers came together, they were pooling their wealth to meet the needs of the vulnerable. So I suspect these food distributions probably went to other people as well. But here in Acts 6, a dispute breaks out. The Greek-speaking Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution, and the Hebrew-speaking widows, they're receiving the assistance. So you see, the church is always fighting, fighting right from the very beginning. It's not new, but it's important that we find good ways to get through our fighting when it happens. Here's what the apostles do. Verse 2. 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 in tables.

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 we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. So this is the assessment that they essentially make. They basically say, preaching of the Word is critical. It's critical. We cannot have this critical ministry waylaid by these material concerns. We cannot neglect the ministry of Word and prayer. They say that up front.

But, this doesn't mean that they then think that material concerns of the people are unimportant. And so they go a step further. And they say, you church, you gather church, they call all the disciples together, you church, you set aside seven godly, high caliber people to take responsibility for the material conditions of the people. Now you need to see the genius of this and what they're doing here, this early Christian movement. They stop the church from falling into the trap of pitting spiritual needs against material needs. And they do that by formally, practically dividing up the labor. They clearly, clearly, clearly establish the primacy of the preaching of the Word. The church has to proclaim the gospel. That's what we're about. We proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

That we are fallen sinners and we need to be reconciled to a holy God. And the only way for that to happen is through placing your repenting and placing your faith in Jesus Christ to save you. We have to keep proclaiming that gospel word. That is what we're about. But there's something else that's also critical to the well-being of the church. And so these guys make a division of labor to emphasize that.

And so by doing that, what they're communicating is this. They're saying, don't for a second think that the caring, caring for material needs is some sort of secondary afterthought.

[11 : 38] It is a critical part of what it means to be a Christian. In fact, that's why you might notice that these early deacons or these proto-deacons are to be people full of the Spirit and of wisdom.

Did you see that? Paul will later give us, which we'll read in a second, the character requirements of deacons in 1 Timothy 3. And it's actually really not that different from the character requirements given to elders. I don't know if you noticed that when we read it just now.

Deacons are supposed to be competent, godly people. The work of deaconing, and that's not a real word, but I'm going to use it today. The word of deaconing is not second-class ministry.

And this division of labor sets up that important balance. See, I think a lot of people tend to think, maybe this is your thought this morning, but I think a lot of people tend to think that deacons are basically mini-elders. Like if you're looking at a person, you think this person might be a great leader, might make a really good elder, but you know what, they're a little bit immature, they need to grow, they're maybe a bit young, they need to grow up a little bit. So let's make them a deacon, and they can kind of mess around in that playpen for a while and practice a little bit, and then when they've grown up, well then we can move them over to the real business, which is the elder business. That's not the Bible's view. Right from the very outset, the office of deacon is a standalone office with a different set of responsibilities and focus areas to that of the elder. There are not different levels of church leadership.

So the first thing we see is that deacons arise out of a need to balance ministry of the word and care of the material needs in the congregation, in the church. So that's the first thing. See, I'll tell you these points to go quick. Second thing, diaconal work is about service.

[13 : 23] The exact task of these early deacons in Acts 6 is described as waiting on tables, verse 2. Those of you who've worked in restaurants in the past, you're thinking, I'm never going to be a deacon now. It's literally serving at tables, and the original Greek word for serving there is the word diakoneo. The noun for deacon in other parts of the Bible is the word diakonos, which is literally just servant, and it actually depends on the context of whether it's an official office deacon or just a servant deacon. One way, I think, to think about it is this way. The office of elder is an office of governance. The office of deacon is an office of service. In one sense, they're both servants, but in different ways. One serves through governance. One serves through practical service.

And it seems, from Acts 6 at least, that the direct and primary object of the service is those within the church who are in material need.

Ed Clowney, very famous Presbyterian minister of the last century, in his important book on the doctrine of the church, he looks at a bunch of different examples from across the New Testament and points out that the word, that that word diakoneo, to serve, is associated most often with serving basic needs of people in distress, people who are vulnerable. That's the most common way that it's used. And he also points out that if you go to places like Romans 12, it's said that there are people with the special gift of showing mercy. So there's definition, I think.

There's definition to the service that deacons provide. And it centers on meeting the material needs, especially among the most vulnerable. Now, I say that, but there's also a practical component to this. And that is that waiting on the tables in this context here would have required the deacons to handle money and resources. And so that you see what happens is through most of church history, deacons are often tasked with stewarding the church's finances and the church's property and those sorts of things. And I think that's completely in line, keeping in line with the broader picture of the New Testament of deacons. But I do think, and I'm not sure churches have always got this right, but I do think that we need to keep the mercy aspect, the serving, the needy aspect central to our conception of deacons. In some churches, deacons just do all the practical work in the church. And the care for the marginalized, for the vulnerable, for those people at risk kind of falls off the agenda a little bit because, you know, well, buildings got to be repaired, budgets got to be finalized, someone's got to cut the lawn outside. And so people just get caught up in all that sort of side. And so we stop caring for those who need our material help the most. I think that is to lose the central focus of the work of the deacon that the New Testament gives to deacons, serving the congregation in mercy ministry. And so the role of the deacon is a role of service. That's the second thing. Here's the third thing. Diaconal work advances the mission of the church. When the diaconal work is functioning well in the church, the overall mission of the church to make disciples, that's what Jesus tells us is the mission of the church, Matthew 28, the overall mission of the church to make disciples is enhanced when diaconal work is working well. Look at verse 5. So the apostles make a proposal to the church, and it says, this proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the

Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. And they presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So they choose seven men to carry out this deaconing work. They commission them, they pray, they lay on hands.

[17:19] That's incidentally why some people think this is the formal establishment of deacons in the New Testament because of the official praying and laying on hands like an ordination service. And then there's Luke's final comment here in verse 7. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests even became obedient to the faith. So Luke says the church grew. It grew and it in fact grew rapidly. And he puts that in there as if to say, when you get this balance right, when you get this balance of word ministry and caring for the material needs of your congregation, when you get that division of labor right, it results in the flourishing of the mission of the church. Occasionally you will hear churches with this sort of rhetoric or Christians with this sort of rhetoric. We just got to preach the gospel. We just got to preach the gospel. This material care stuff, yes, we probably have to do it at some level because Jesus tells us to care for the poor, but it's kind of way, way, way down the priority list somewhere. We just got to preach the gospel. I think the Bible, by having a formal office of deacon, says that that sort of rhetoric is problematic. It's not biblical. Caring for the material needs of our people is critical, absolutely critical to our mission. So you want the church to grow? Well then, yes, you best be preaching the gospel, preaching your heart out. It is of the utmost importance, but you need to make sure that you also give yourself to the needy and the vulnerable in your ranks. And if you think about it, this makes complete sense. It's inherently practical and just common sense. If you're trying to attract people to the gospel of Jesus Christ, you're going to have a really, really hard time doing that without a robust diaconal work in your church. Because people are going to come in, skeptics are going to come in, the people that you're engaging with in the city and you're building friendships with, and you're saying, hey, I want you to hear about this Jesus that I worship. Come and listen to my pastor. He's not half bad. He manages to get through with a couple of only slightly cringeworthy jokes each Sunday. So come, listen to his explanation for Jesus. And you bring your friend and you finally, after months of praying, years of praying, get your friend to come to church.

And your friend comes in, sits in this church for a while, observes it for a while, realizes there's not really any diaconal ministry or real care for the poor going on. And sort of a sudden they turn to you and they say, you proclaim this Jesus who brings life all the time, but you don't even bring life to the most vulnerable members of your own community here. The people who sit in the same pews as you on a Sunday. How can I then possibly believe in this Jesus? See friends, a vibrant diaconal ministry is critical to the growth and the health and the mission of the church. It should not be kind of a secondary afterthought. Now one thing to add here, just in case you're wondering about this, having a vibrant diaconal ministry doesn't mean the church outsources all of its care work to a select few to do the work. Like you just give your money to the benevolence fund and the deacons will take your money, thank you very much, and they'll go off and do all the work. You pay for the labor basically, so you don't have to do it yourself. That is not how it works. The deacons certainly take responsibility. In fact, that's what the apostles say. They take responsibility for it, but everybody is under the obligation to get involved in some measure. Galatians chapter 6 verse 10, the apostle Paul says, therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. That's not to deacons. That's to everybody, you and me, all of us, elders, deacons, everybody. The office of the deacon in some ways is there to spur the rest of us on.

That's why the Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination that we work very closely with, in their book of church order, they have a line on deacons that reads this. It says, it is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church. So deacons develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church.

Liberality is the quality, I had to look this up, it's the quality of giving or spending freely, but it's not just your money, it's your time and your energy as well. The deacons are supposed to develop that in us, the rest of us. God has set up the office of deacon in his church to move us all to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress.

And thereby, through that, we advance the mission of the church together. So that's the third thing. Here is the fourth thing. Diaconal work is for appropriately qualified people. There are certain qualifications for being a deacon. In Act 6, the apostles instruct the people to choose from them, people who are full of the spirit and wisdom, it says. But we actually see the qualifications for deacons very, very clearly when we turn to 1 Timothy chapter 3. So if you've got a hard copy there, turn to that passage, 1 Timothy 3, 8 to 13. Look down at verse 8. Paul says, In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

[22 : 56] They must first be tested, and then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus. Now, we looked at the first seven verses of 1 Timothy chapter 3 a few weeks ago when we discussed the qualifications for elders. And so straight after that, Paul moves on to the next office, and he gives the qualifications for deacons. And as I kind of alluded to earlier on in this sermon, as you look at it, the list is basically the same as the list for elders. There's a high character bar for deacons, which I think, again, elevates the significance and the importance of the office of deacon in the church. There is spiritual maturity that's required for deacons. In fact, verse 10 says they must be tested. Like, check them out first and make sure they're up to scratch before you kind of make them a deacon, before you lay on hands. The difference comes in this. The difference actually comes between deacons and elders at the skill level. The skill of teaching that's required of the elders is missing in the list for the deacons. And so it kind of confirms what we've said already about distinct roles of different offices of elder and deacon. Elders govern by teaching the word deacons serve. They're not primarily teachers. But there's a caveat here that I want to put in.

Because verse 9 says they must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith. So there must be theological maturity and depth in a deacon. We can't just kind of look at a person and say, oh, you know, that person has a bleeding heart for the vulnerable. Let's make them a deacon. Or that person is so good at managing finances. Let's make them a deacon. We want those things. Certainly we want those things in the people that we appoint. But we want more than that. We want theological and spiritual maturity. And there is a very, very, very practical reason for why we want this. The work of deaconing will require theological reflection and will even require a level of pastoral sensitivity and input.

Think about the kind of scenarios that deacons will find themselves in. One very practical problem deacons will face is to determine who are the rightful recipients of material support and material care. It's going to be a constant problem deacons are going to be faced with. Different congregations are at different socioeconomic levels. There's the question of the formal welfare that's offered by the state or by NGOs. There's informal welfare that's offered by families within the church. What role does the church play there in assistance? And what role do the other institutions play? That's actually the exact question that the Apostle Paul raises later on in the same book in chapter 5 when he talks about the widows in the church in Ephesus. And he talks about which ones of them are eligible for direct help from the church, which ones should be looked after by their family members. Now to answer those sorts of questions and have a clear understanding of the interplay between the church and the state and the family is in part a theological task.

And so the deacons need to be up for that. They need to be up for applying biblical theology and not just kind of raw pragmatism in these situations. Because that's the danger, that we just try and make quick fixes, expedient fixes to situations going on. We don't actually apply the Bible to them.

Think about another scenario. The other reality of diaconal work is that you get into the middle of people's very messy and very broken lives. And so you're going to regularly be afforded opportunities to offer spiritual counsel in those moments, to pray with people, to comfort them, to comfort them with words from scripture. And so you need then, I think, a certain maturity in the faith to be able to do that. You don't just go and serve a person who's gone through some sort of traumatic bereavement and go, well, here's your Willie's frozen dinner. See you later.

[27 : 13] You pray. You give words of encouragement. And so, although deacons don't conduct the formal teaching ministry of the church, they are required to be theologically and spiritually mature and then sound in character, as we saw in that list.

So that's the fourth thing we see. Here's the fifth thing. The diaconal work is for men and women. Now we had a very, very long discussion, if you were here a couple of weeks ago, about whether or not both men and women can serve in the office of elder.

If you weren't here for that and you missed that, you need to go back onto our website and listen to what we said about that. But what about the office of deacon? Is it the same as the office of elders? Is it different? Well, look at verse 11.

Chapter 3 of 1 Timothy, Paul says, In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers, but temperate and trustworthy in everything. Now, if you are reading the NIV, the New International Version Translation, you'll see there's a footnote next to that word woman.

That footnote says that this could refer either to woman deacons or to the wives of deacons. And so it's a big question in an interpretation. Is verse 11, I mean, if the NIV translators thought it was a big enough thing to put a footnote in, it must mean it's complicated.

[28 : 35] So is verse 11 about deacons' wives or about women who are deacons? Something like the ESV, the English Standard Version Translation, has wives there instead of women, like the NIV. And the Greek word itself can actually be translated either woman or wives, and it's totally, totally dependent upon the context as to which one you choose.

Whether it's read wives, whether it's read women. And whether it's read in this context here, whether it's read as wives or as women, makes a big difference as to whether or not you think the office of deacon is open to women.

There are, this is something that has divided conservative Presbyterians. There are many, and I would say probably the majority, of Bible-believing conservative Presbyterians that believe the office of deacon should be restricted to men only, in the same way that the office of elder is restricted.

And while I certainly respect that view, and I think there is a reasonable, very reasonable, biblical argument to be made for restricting the office of deacon to men, that's not the view that we take here.

It's not my view personally. It's not the view that we take here at Union Chapel, nor is it the view of our denomination, Parker Say, the Presbyterian and Reformed Church of South Africa. So let me tell you why. Why do we go, like Trevor Noah says, take a different direction here?

[29 : 52] A few reasons. Number one. It seems to me that woman is a more natural reading of the text than wives.

Normally, if we were referring to wives, you'd expect, and this is going to take you back to high school English here, but you would expect a possessive pronoun in front of the word.

That's one of the ways that you can tell when that word has been used as wives or whether it's intended to be used as woman in other parts of the New Testament. So if it was wives, we would expect the text to say, their wives, adding that possessive pronoun, clearly showing that Paul is talking about the wives of the male deacons that he's talking about.

But that possessive pronoun is not there. It's missing in the text, and so I think just a straightforward, more natural reading is simply the woman. So that's the first thing. Second thing.

If it is referring to deacons' wives, it's rather strange that they get singled out, but the wives of the elders don't get singled out in the earlier verses in the chapter.

[31 : 01] You might remember that when we went through those earlier verses last time. Why randomly talk about deacons' wives, but not talk about elders' wives in the same chapter, where he's got the two things parallel to each other?

If it's important for deacons' wives to conduct themselves in a certain way, then surely, surely it is equally important for elders' wives to conduct themselves in a certain way, and for Paul to make a comment about that. And so it seems rather strange to suddenly start talking about deacons' wives without talking about elders' wives in the parallel section.

It's the second thing. Third thing is we have what appears to be a pretty clear reference to a female deacon in another part of the Bible. In Romans chapter 16, verse 1.

Here's what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 16. He says, Now you look at that and you think, well, that looks like a slam-dunk case then for female deacons.

But many interpreters have rightly said, No, hang on a second. Hang on, hang on, hang on. The word for deacon is simply the word servant. And so the context determines whether or not that word is being used in a kind of generic sense.

[32 : 18] She was a faithful servant in that particular church, or in an official office sense. She's an official deacon in that particular church. So which one is it? And so rather than making the case myself, I'm just going to read to you from the world-class scholar, who's a very conservative scholar by the name of Tom Schreiner.

He is a Baptist, but don't hold that against him. He's a great guy. And he says this. We love you Baptists. He says, In translations of Romans chapter 16, verse 1, Phoebe is either a deacon or a servant of the church in Kincrea.

With so little to go on, the decision could go either way. For the word diakonos in Greek may refer to a servant without having the idea of a particular office. Nevertheless, the addition of the words, The church in Kincrea suggests an official capacity.

Verse 2 supports this understanding, since Phoebe is designated as a patron or a benefactor, which means she regularly helped, perhaps financially, those in need. So again, it seems to me like the most natural reading of the text is that Phoebe is an office bearer.

She's a formal deacon in the church. One way to kind of see this is this natural reading of the text, is to ask a hypothetical question.

[33 : 35] If Phoebe was a man, if the text read, Bob, a deacon of the church in Kincrea, would people be hand-wringing over whether or not Bob was just a servant-hearted fellow in the church, or an official deacon in the church?

I think that it is near certain that if Phoebe was Bob, not a single conservative Bible scholar would fail to point out that Bob is an example of an official office-bearing deacon in the church, not just a servant-hearted guy.

There's more stuff I could say about this, and one of the extra supporting things is that we have a lot of material evidence in the first century, into the second century more, and the early writings, and even in material evidence like frescoes and that, that there were in fact female deacons in the early church.

We have no such evidence of elders. We mentioned this a couple of weeks ago, female elders. We do have very clear references to female deacons in the second century of the church. And so I'll bring all this together to say, while some of my favorite, favorite theologians are on the other side of this particular debate from me, and while I think this debate should be had in good faith, and there is certainly some complexity and some nuance to this, that is, intelligible Christians who hold to, intelligent Christians, not intelligible, intelligent Christians who hold to male-only deaconate, that they are, I don't think we should think they're misogynistic patriarchalists.

Like you and me, they're just trying to do their best to understand and apply this text carefully and faithfully. But that all being said, I am still persuaded that a more natural reading of Scripture provides for female deacons.

[35 : 17] And that's been our practice in the last 11 years here, and it will, it's a practice of our denomination, will continue to be our practice. Number six, last one.

Deaconal work shows us our true greatness. Shows us our true greatness. Paul closes off the list of qualifications in a certain way. He says these words in verse 13, he says, those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

He's basically saying that the deacons, the deacons who have served well, literally the deacons who have deked well, gain great esteem. They'll be truly great, and their faith in Christ will be deepened.

See, the reality is that in a church where deaconal work is done well, you will often never see a large amount of that work. You will never see the hours of dedication put in by the deacons and those assisting them, caring for people who've just kind of had their lives fall to pieces through illness, or through disaster, or through bereavement, or through just the general harshness of life in this world.

You'll never see the cost endured by those people, by those deacons, as they serve. You'll never see the emotional strain of confronting what seems like, particularly here, seems like the relentless poverty of our country, that just poverty of our country, that just doesn't give up.

[36 : 42] It never doesn't get in our face. You'll never see the spiritual psychological burden of being regularly confronted with human brokenness. And that's because the work of the deacon is discreet.

Necessarily so. In order to uphold the dignity of those who are being served. But it is in those moments of unseen, unnoticed service, that true greatness is found.

And so in this way, the office of deacon not only kind of motivates and encourages all of us into true greatness, the true greatness of service, but it points us forward. It points us forward to true greatness.

And you say, how so? Well, listen to these words from Mark 10. As Jesus, Jesus calls his disciples around him, and he, he teaches them about true greatness. Jesus called them together and said, you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.

[38 : 03] You know what Jesus essentially says in that last line? And now you'll understand why I'm making up words like deaking. But he literally says, the son of man came not to be deaconed, but to deke.

And his deaking took the form of him giving his life as a ransom. Ransom for us, to ransom us from sin and death, and the brokenness that enslaves us all.

That's true greatness. The one who deserves to be served by all, by virtue of being the eternal son of God, he comes and he serves us.

At the cost of his life. And so the Apostle Paul can say that anyone who is going to give themselves to that costly service will gain true greatness and a deepened faith in the one whose costly service has made all the difference in our lives.

Friends, the work of the diaconate is a pushing back against the darkness. That's what it is. Pushing back against the darkness. It's this defiance against all that is wrong with this world.

[39 : 17] It's to use tangible acts of love and care and mercy to proclaim the one who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

It's what they do. It's what we do when we help them. And when we are motivated by them. So let me close with this. We ought to pray for our deacons.

Number one. Because of what they do and what they face. We ought to pray for our deacons. Number two. We ought to ask the Lord to raise up more deacons.

In this church, we desperately need more deacons. We need to pray and ask the Lord to raise up more deacons. Number three. We ought to ask the question of our own hearts.

How are we assisting and serving as an extension of the deacons in the lives of the brothers and sisters around us who sit in these pews and come to this church? What are we doing?

[40 : 13] And then number four. We ought to ask whether or not we are pursuing true greatness and deeper faith in Christ as we, our lives reflect him who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Let's pray together. Our Father and our King, we want to thank you for the men and the women who you have raised up as deacons in our church.

We want to thank you for their work and for their commitment. We want to honor them. Thank you for their lives. Thank you for the display of true greatness that is on, that is seen in their lives, Lord.

We don't get to see all of it. Not everyone is privy to that, but I get to see a lot of it, Lord, and I am truly grateful to you for the caliber of people you have brought to us and who serve in this capacity.

Father, we ask for this particular ministry to be extended in our church, for you to expand it by raising up more formal office-bearing deacons, according to your word, but also by encouraging more and more of us to come alongside the deacons and to serve and help them in their work, Lord.

[41 : 27] That we might, through engaging in that service, know something of the one who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Father, I pray that there will be people in our church who will come here and who will experience that deaconal work, that service, and through that will be open to the beautiful truth of the gospel.

We'll come to see the Son of Man as their Savior and as their Lord, and they will repent of their sin and trust in him. Maybe there's someone who's sitting here like that this morning, Lord, I pray that they would place their faith in Jesus.

For the rest of us, teach us how to honor the diaconate and how to build a church that has a healthy diaconate and serves the diaconate, Lord, we ask, according to your word.

For Christ's sake. Amen. For Christ's sake.