

1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13

(Reading: 1 Peter 4:1-11; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13)

The Man Who Serves In Christ's Church!

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

What was your first impression of these verses which make up the text for this afternoon's sermon?

Which thought struck you as we read these verses, especially following the seven verses before it?

Could it have been that what hit you was the similarity of these qualities to those spelt out above?

Apart from the title of 'deacons' used at the beginning of verse 8, it could be a literal repeating of what's just been said.

In fact, as we go through these verses we will see how these qualities are even more the same than what we thought!

So what's the story here?

Surely Paul isn't describing the same thing so that 'deacons' are actually 'elders' and vice versa.

For there are some churches which take it that way.

And there are also churches which tie deacons and elders so closely together that a deacon is simply a junior elder, or an elder in training.

They would see verse 10 as describing a kind of entry test into the first step of office in the church.

This is where it helps us, congregation, to put this in a much bigger picture.

That would have been the context Timothy understood it in.

And we very much have to see the same here also.

Thus it is that our first aspect concerns **WHAT IS HERE IMPLICITLY COMPREHENDED.**

For we have to see that this wasn't said in a vacuum.

In fact, as soon as the apostle uses the word 'deacon' it would have immediately hit a cord with Timothy.

Of course, you say, it would have hit a cord because of what we read about deacons elsewhere.

There's the well-known Acts chapter 6 passage.

In the situation of the rapidly growing New Testament Church, seven men were appointed as deacons so that the apostles could focus on prayer and the preaching of the Word.

Those men assisted in a vital aspect of the church's ministry.

They made sure no one missed out in the daily distribution of the bread – the compassionate arm of the Church.

And we should not see their practical ministry as any less spiritual.

Indeed, doesn't verse 5 there say that one of those first deacons, Stephen, was "full of faith and the Holy Spirit"?

So Timothy and the early church knew all about deacons.

There would have been deacons there in Ephesus and in many of the churches.

But the use of the name 'deacon' would also have struck another cord with Timothy.

It's the same cord we heard of as we read 1st Peter chapter 4.

For there in verses 10 and 11 all the gifts found within Christ's Church are subsumed under two areas – teaching and serving.

As Peter there writes, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

"If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.

"If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ."

You see, the word 'deacon' is translated as 'servant'.

There is a direct connection between this title and the serving gifts within the church.

This is also seen because of what is not carried over in the verses 8 till 13 from the verses 1 till 7.

Did you notice which qualification didn't make an appearance?

In fact, it is the qualification which clearly sets apart the two offices.

Because here there is no mention of the "being able to teach" of verse 2 above.

And the teaching gift relates directly to the 'speaking' group of gifts in 1st Peter 4 verse 11.

So while there must be the same high moral qualities, which we'll consider in a moment, there is a clear distinction as to the respective roles of elders and deacons in the church.

When this distinction has become lost or even obscured in church history we find unhealthy imbalances in the life of the church.

Then we find church courts become like company meetings with their annual reports and the like.

And then, on the other side, we find churches becoming nothing less than social welfare agencies.

It's essential to keep the biblical balance.

And that's what we do when the offices of elder and deacon are tied in with their respective gift groupings.

You see, if you consider the New Testament letters where the different gifts are listed, you will find that all of them fit in under either of these two areas.

For they are relating to speaking or to serving.

Now, you could say that the concept of 'serving' should be in the heart of every believer.

Didn't Jesus Himself say this in Matthew 20?

There, when His disciples were indignant that James and John had sought higher positions with the Lord, Jesus replied to them, "You know that the 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 your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Every Christian must show this Christ-likeness.

So it's no surprise Paul describes his own ministry like this.

Colossians 1 verse 23 is one time he calls himself a servant.

But so that this particular attribute is always held up and lived out in the Church there is the office of deacon.

They are those who in the local congregation visit and care for the needy.

They pray with them.

And so it is that we now consider, in the second place, WHAT IS HERE EXPLICITLY STATED.

For having seen the reason for having deacons we now turn to their qualifications.

Thus it is that they must be "men worthy of respect."

They have to be of the same high moral standing with the elders.

By using the word "likewise" Paul emphasises this.

Then there are three qualities mentioned in the negative.

These are that deacons must be sincere, not drunkards, and not dishonest.

We might wonder how being sincere is negative.

Well, in the original Greek it literally means to be not double-tongued.

So in what they say and do and think they must clearly show they belong to Christ.

I mean, you can imagine what it would be like if they didn't live this way.

Then you couldn't trust deacons to say the right things – or even not to say the wrong things!

And having an addiction problem would mean that the Lord isn't controlling them.

No wonder alcohol used to be called 'the demon drink'!

Because then you don't have Christ's Spirit in you.

And being honest can be the only attitude deacons take towards their office.

For they are the ones who generally handle the finances of the church.

And how many times haven't church finances been plundered by those who were greedy?

At this point we see a subtle difference to the elders, which illustrates their different tasks.

For in verse 3 the quality the elders had to have was that they were not to love the money paid to them.

Here in verse 8 it's speaking of the money entrusted to the deacons.

In verse 9 we see again the difference between the two offices.

And you might wonder how this is so.

Shouldn't elders also "keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience"?

Doesn't this speak of the truth about the doing and dying and rising again of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Isn't this the hallmark of all those who truly believe.

They confess to the mystery – because they've been let into the secret!

They have experienced the joy of God's salvation.

And so they are able to serve in church office.

But notice there is not the additional requirement here that they be able to teach those truths.

Dacons simply need to be able to hold the truth faithfully in their own lives.

This is where we must speak against the idea of deacons being junior elders or assistant elders.

In so many churches they are the young men at the stage just before becoming elders.

And that's totally wrong!

In fact, deacons can often be the older more mature men.

They are perhaps those who have served as elders but found they did not have the gifting to lead and teach.

Or they are those who through the passage of years have gained much empathy with the poor and suffering.

Then, when Paul speaks of "a clear conscience" here it is not about how that deacon himself feels about things.

People today often use the word 'conscience' as their justification for whether they're happy with something or not.

Rather, here it refers to an active conscientious obedience.

This is a man living out the faith.

That will be seen in him before he became a deacon.

Verse 10 describes a testing the prospective deacon must undergo.

And let's not think this is an additional requirement to those for an elder above.

Elders must be those who have managed their own families well first of all.

Isn't that a clear test they have to pass?

Indeed, what the requirement of verse 10 means is that no man can quickly become a deacon.

And neither should it be done for reasons of expediency either.

Michael Bentley mentions an occasion in a church he was a member of which shows this wrong view.

Upon hearing that one of the young men was thinking of leaving for another church with his wife, the senior deacon of that congregation said, "Let's make him a deacon and perhaps he'll change his mind about leaving us."

You can only be a deacon if you are biblically qualified.

And if a man is so gifted it would not be good for the church to fail to ordain him.

We should not think that you can only have a certain number of deacons per congregation, in the same way that you can only have a certain number of elders.

If suitable men are in the congregation, they should be ordained.

Wouldn't it be great if the vast majority of men in a church were office bearers?

And wouldn't it be just as honouring to the Lord if all the women in the church were equally glorifying God by what they believed and how they lived?

This is what verse 11 turns its attention to.

Mind you, this is a verse which has two different interpretations.

Interpretations which depend on your hermeneutic of Scripture – so how you understand God's Word.

Let me explain.

You see, as we've gone through this first letter to Timothy so far it's been clear about the male headship in the church as much as it should be in the family.

Following that line, deacons as office-bearers are also men.

So when it speaks about their wives here it's referring to them in a similar way that the family in verses 4 and 5 show the Christian leadership of the potential elder in his home.

But there is a view that translates the word for 'wives' here as 'deaconesses', a similar office in the church for women.

Mind you, it's not the word 'deaconess' that's the problem.

That word simply means 'servant-woman'.

This is how Phoebe in Romans 16 verse 1 is described.

The problem comes when one begins to convert what describes the way many women served in the New Testament as referring to them holding this certain church office.

But there is no specific role outlined for these women.

In fact, isn't this verse picturing the nurturing and caring that we have always known in our women-folk?

Certainly, being temperate and trustworthy rather than malicious talkers is what the apostle describes all believing women should be like in Titus chapter 2!

So, in this office which is particularly about getting next to people and loving them in a gentle way, it's shown how much the wives must support the husbands in their work.

It's not just minister's wives who have to be highly regarded!

And so it is we come in verse 12 to a virtual repeat of verses 4 and 5.

He's not forgetting the rest of the family here either!

The wife and the children must all show he's managing things at home God's way.

In this way we come to the third aspect in connection with the text this afternoon.

It's an aspect which not only draws together what pertains to deacons but also what applies to all those in church office.

For, congregation, let's note, WHAT IS HERE EXPECTANTLY ANTICIPATED.

This is what we especially see in verse 13.

But already in verse 10 we gain a glimpse into this.

For if a man has passed the test so that he is ordained into office he already has a certain standing.

It's a standing, mind you, that he cannot take pride in.

In fact, this is the kind of standing which finds you often kneeling, because you must be a man of prayer.

You are one who is humble before the Lord.

And so it's the Lord Jesus others see in him!

Congregation, as we see WHAT IS HERE EXPECTANTLY ANTICIPATED don't we to acknowledge we don't consider this anywhere near enough?

Think about it: We are only pilgrims here, we are just those passing through this very temporary veil of tears.

So what should matter most of all is our eternal destination.

It's when we focus on living obediently with the One we're going to spend all eternity with that we live the right way.

And as you live that right way there's two things which confirm to you God's blessing on what you do.

The first of these verse 13 expresses as the gaining of an excellent standing.

It's easy to get the world's commendation.

Pleasing other people comes naturally.

But pleasing the Lord is a different story.

To have Him say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” is something else!

You only need to go to where Jesus says these words in Matthew 25 to realise this.

Because there the Lord is shown on judgment day addressing two groups of people – one called the sheep and the other called the goats.

And looking on the outside they might not seem so different.

For example, they are both asked the same question, and they answer it the same way!

But the difference was shown in how they treated the least of people.

Because while the goats looked to serve what seemed high and mighty, the sheep love everyone.

The sheep, who are the righteous, show Christ’s compassion.

They obey His words in John 13 verse 34, for they love one another the way Jesus has loved them.

This excellent standing the deacon has in the congregation comes as the result of years of loyal and loving service.

He is trusted with even more responsibilities.

But what is even more is the assurance he has to his faith in Christ Jesus.

How true it is that those who walk nearer and dearer to their Lord are those who doubt less about their standing with the Lord.

Being busy in the Lord’s service is the best tonic for all ills.

Because through that the Lord gives you even more.

This is what Paul spoke of in Philippians 4.

There he told of how he had learned to content whatever the circumstances.

For whether in plenty or in want, whether well-fed or hungry, he could do everything through Him who gives him strength.

In Paul’s last letter, his second letter to Timothy, he brings this out even more.

For there he faced death he did so with the most complete confidence.

There he could boldly declare in verses 7 and 8 of chapter 4, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

“Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day - and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

Dear friend, is that what you pray and work for?

Because by loving Him, honouring Him, living your life to His glory and helping your fellow-believer in this world, we’re helped to look all the more to the next world.

That’s the “great assurance” the apostle speaks of.

And what a marvellous joy that is!

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Loving Heavenly Father, in Your Son, our dear Saviour, you showed us how to perfectly serve.

He gladly came down to be with us and to die for us.

And, in the same way, You call us to love each other.

We thank You for those You have called to especially model this to us.

We pray for our deacons, their wives and families.

May they continue to show Christ's compassion among us in the most loving way.

In all we do, Lord God, help us to look to You.

For it's by obeying Your Word that we look forward all the more to that soon coming Great Day of Christ's return.

In His Name alone we pray, Amen.