



Text: 1 Timothy 3:8-13¹

Series: Living the Gospel

Title: Part 9 -- Living the Gospel as Servants in God's House

Date: March 14, 2010

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

In our study of Paul's First Letter to Timothy we have come to Paul's instruction on the selection of deacons. As we discovered two weeks ago, the word "deacon" literally means "servant" and so this morning I want to speak with you about "living the Gospel as servants in God's House." Together, let's hear God's Word for us this morning...

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. ¹¹ Their wives likewise [ESV: OR "Wives, likewise" OR "Women, likewise"] must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. ¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. ¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

I am amazed by servants. I don't mean those people you see playing servants on TV or in the movies. I mean those people who walk the halls of this church and the streets of this community, serving others in the name of Jesus Christ. This morning, I want to honour those who serve in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. My focus isn't only on those who have formal positions as servants, people I call "designated servants," but also those who serve quietly and without public acknowledgement. This morning I want to encourage you in your service for the Lord. As I reflected on our passage for this morning there was one word that fixed itself in my mind. It's the word...

"dignified" v.8, 11

In the Christian faith there is a remarkable beauty and dignity accorded to the humble act of serving others. There is a reason for that, of course. The Christian faith is built on the life of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus died and rose again. We believe that he is alive and that he is present here today by His Spirit. As we worship him today he is literally among us, moving in our minds and spirits, touching hearts, bringing comfort and conviction and insight. As we

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move through our days, Jesus is always with us. Jesus is among us. As we discovered two weeks ago in our look at Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus elevated and dignified the work of servants when he declared...

“I am among you as the one who serves.” Luke 22:27

Here this morning and throughout the week as you leave this place, “the One who serves” is among you and he invites you to follow him in serving others in his name. Every believer in Jesus is called to follow the example of “the One who serves.” Serving others is our life. However, the Christian faith takes the role of servant so seriously and accords it such honour that there are, if you will, “designated servants” within the church that are publicly called and set apart to serve the body of Christ. The New Testament calls these “designated servants,” deacons.

What did these “designated servants” do? Although the Bible is very clear about the qualifications required for these “designated servants,” what these deacons were asked to do in the church isn't as clearly defined. Elders (1 Tim 3:1-7) were clearly responsible in the church for the oversight of the body as a whole by giving doctrinal instruction and by making leadership decisions (1 Tim 5:17). Deacons, on the other hand, seem to have been responsible for the care of the body of believers through practical acts of servant-like kindness. The New Testament evidence is limited and fragmentary about the specific nature of their service. Paul's description of spiritual gifts gives us a hint about the many ways in which deacons served the body. Paul wrote...

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord” 1 Corinthians 12:4-5

The idea that the work of the deacons was primarily practical in nature is partly drawn from a story in Acts chapter 6 about the selection of seven men who were to be responsible to look after the distribution of food to the widows in the Jerusalem church. A group of the widows in the church in Jerusalem were not being properly cared for and it was causing tension. So that the apostles could continue to devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word,” (Acts 6:4) seven men were appointed from the church...

“to serve tables.” Acts 6:2

Although the word “deacon” is never applied to these seven men, their work is described as “serving” and the distribution of food to the widows is literally called, “the daily service.” (Acts 6:1)

The deacons in the New Testament church, then, seem to have been a group of people who were publicly set aside to look after the practical needs of the believers. They are the ones who made sure that the people were properly



cared for; if roofs needed to be repaired, they looked after it; if meals needed to be provided, they saw to it; if someone needed clothing, they gathered it; if financial assistance was required, they dispensed it; if someone needed a shoulder to cry on, they offered it; if someone needed compassion and prayer in a time of grief or failure, they were there to give it. The deacons were the people who cared for people in those times when need was very real and very personal. That is why the qualifications for the role of “designated servant” are so high! These people stood in the gap for those in the body of Christ who were vulnerable and in great need and that is why it was important that only spiritually qualified and trustworthy people be appointed to this ministry.

It’s also, I believe, why Paul included women in the ministry of deacons in verse 11. When women in the church were vulnerable and in need of care, it made good spiritual sense to provide that care through the ministry of female deacons. When a woman needed a shoulder to cry on, it needed to be the shoulder of a trusted woman; when a woman needed prayer and counsel, it needed to come from a spiritually qualified sister in the Lord.

The interpretation of verse 11 is a matter of real debate among Bible-believing Christians. Although I take Paul’s words to refer to female deacons, others understand him to be referring to the wives of deacons who served alongside their husbands as “designated servants.” Whether Paul is referring to “female deacons” or to “deacons’ wives,” we need to understand that neither interpretation violates the principle of male spiritual headship in the church because deacons did not exercise spiritual oversight for the church. That was the role of the elders. The ability to teach sound doctrine, which is such a key qualification for an elder or overseer, is not listed among the qualities required of a deacon. The deacons, on the other hand, emphasized the ministry of care.

There are essentially two reasons why I understand verse 11 to be referring to women serving as deacons. **First** of all, the structure of v.11 is identical to verse 8. Paul begins his discussion of deacons with the words...

“Deacons likewise must be dignified...” v.8

Verse 11 literally reads...

“Women [or Wives] likewise must be dignified...” v.11

Frequently in his letters Paul used the word “likewise” to begin lists relating to different groups of people (cf. 1 Tim 2:9; Titus 2:3, 6). He has just listed the qualities to be sought in the overseers in verses 1 to 7 of this chapter. When he turns to consider the qualifications for the deacons, he begins his list with “likewise” in verse 8. Now in verse 11, he begins another list of qualities that relate to “women” or “wives.” What is notable about the list of qualities in verse 11 is that the terms he uses essentially repeat the qualifications for deacons that



he has just enumerated in verses 8 to 10. Verse 11 reads very much as if Paul is beginning a whole new list, not merely adding to his comments about male deacons.

The ESV adds the word “their” to its translation – “Their wives” -- but the word does not appear in Greek. The Greek simply reads either “Women,” or “Wives,” and the reason it could be either is that the Greek word is the same for both translations. What determines whether its “women” or “wives” is the context. It seems likely to me that if Paul had meant the “wives of deacons,” he would have indicated it by adding the word, “their.” But that’s a debatable point, and “wives” is an acceptable translation of the underlying Greek word. If it’s “wives” you would then have to assume that he means the wives of deacons and that’s why the ESV adds the word “their.” The difference in translation seems to rest on whether you emphasize the similarity between v.8 and v.11 which suggests the translation of “women,” or whether you emphasize the connection between v.11 and v.12 which suggests the translation of “wives.”

You might ask: if Paul meant female deacons, why didn’t he call them “deaconesses”? However, what you need to know is that at the time Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, there was no female form of the word “deacon.” The word, “deaconess” (Greek: *diaconissa*) didn’t appear in the Greek language until about three centuries after the writing of the New Testament. The only way that Paul could identify these women as deacons, separate from male deacons, was to call them “women.”

This leads me to the **second** reason why I take Paul to be referring to female deacons in v.11. In his conclusion to the Letter to the Romans, Paul refers to a woman by the name of Phoebe. He wrote...

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [ESV: or deaconess] of the church at Cenchrea...” Romans 16:1

I take issue with the ESV’s suggestion of the translation “deaconess” because as I just mentioned the female form of the word “deacon” wasn’t in existence at the time of the writing of the New Testament. The word Paul actually used to describe this woman is, in fact, the same masculine form of the Greek word translated as “deacon” in 1 Timothy. I think that the NRSV translates the phrase more correctly as...

“a deacon of the church at Cenchreae” Romans 16:1 (NRSV)

The Greek word “*deaconos*” can mean either “deacon” or “servant” but the fact that Phoebe is spoken of as a *deaconos* “of the church in Cenchreae” suggests to me that she was a “designated servant” of that church. As the translators indicate, there is honest difference of opinion among Bible-believing scholars on this question and so I’ll leave you to make up your own mind on the question.



Our church's practice has been to understand that Paul is referring to female deacons and that is why we have a group of "designated servants" in our church that we call "**deaconesses**." Their primary ministry is to minister to the women of this church who are facing those vulnerable moments in their lives and I am very grateful for the care they give and the ministry they provide. Having a team of women who minister as "designated servants" within our church means that the women of this church have someone safe to go to in order to receive support and care from a wise and mature fellow Christian.

As we walk through the qualities that Paul enumerates for deacons I'd like you to keep a couple of things in mind. **First** of all, I'm going to use the term "deacon" rather than "deacon" and "deaconess," just to keep things simple. However, I want you to remember that I understand that Paul allows for both men and women to be called to serve as deacons. **Secondly**, I want you to remember that these qualities are not listed in order to separate "designated "servants" from the rest of the church body. These qualifications are virtues to which every believer should aspire and I would hope that every one of us would orient our lives so that we would be found qualified to serve as "designated servants" for the church of Jesus Christ. Don't make the mistake of thinking that because you aren't a "deacon" that Paul's words here are irrelevant to your life. Make it your goal to be qualified! **Thirdly**, I want us to think of these qualities, not so much as a checklist of virtues, but as a picture of the incredible value that God places upon the work of the servants in His house. Servants in God's house are highly valued and esteemed because they are following the example of his Son, who is continually among us as "the one who serves." At the Deacons meeting this week Pastor Paris encouraged us to think about ways we can esteem the work of those who serve among us. God's Word makes it clear that the work of servants in his house is highly valued and we want to reflect His heart in the way we express our appreciation for the service that is rendered in the name of Christ.

Paul begins his list of servant qualities by drawing our attention, **first** of all, to...

The Dignity of Service

"Deacons likewise must be dignified ... [Women] likewise must be dignified..." 1 Timothy 3:8, 11

There is no shame in being chosen to be a servant for the people of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, it's an honour! During the Christmas season Shawna Mumert wrote some excellent short dramas and in one of them she made reference to closing a letter to the queen with the words, "***I have the honour to remain your majesty's most humble and obedient servant.***" When we consider that we are serving the family of the King of the universe, it is truly an honour to be his "most humble and obedient servant" called to care for the needs of his children. Think of it: our Father in heaven has put his children into the care



of his “designated servants.” What an honour! What a weighty and serious responsibility!

The word translated as “dignity” carries with it the sense of “serious and worthy of respect.” As John MacArthur sees it, it doesn’t mean that a deacon is joyless but rather that he or she “understands the seriousness of life.” Deacons are people who take the needs of God’s people seriously and because of that they respond intentionally and thoughtfully.

I know that our Deacons and Deaconesses take your needs seriously. Every month, before the Deaconesses meet, I get a phone call or an email from the chair of the Deaconesses asking me if there are any special needs of which they should be aware. That’s because they take your needs seriously! At the Deacons meeting this past week, we addressed some very important needs in the lives of the people of this church and we did it because we take life seriously and we take your needs seriously.

And both the Deacons and Deaconesses are responsible for many different ministries that address the serious life issues that you face: DivorceCare, GriefShare, and the new Break of Day ministry, just to name three initiatives. We take life seriously here at First Baptist Church because God takes life seriously and we look for deacons who share God’s heart and who prepared to serve with dignity.

Secondly, Paul is concerned about...

The Integrity of Service

He wrote that deacons must be...

“not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. ... not slanderers, but sober-minded” 1 Timothy 3:8, 11

When you consider that deacons frequently meet people when they are most needy and vulnerable, it’s easy to see that the occasion for slander and the malicious use of information is often present. Deacons need to be people to guard the privacy of people as they walk with them through hardship and failure.

Not being “double-tongued” means simply “not engaging in double talk.” (NEB) Being “double-tongued” in speech means being insincere in communication; it refers to the sad practice of saying one thing to someone when you are with them but then saying what you really think when they aren’t around. Essentially, it means not speaking the truth. Not being “slanderers” means not spreading “juicy” gossip designed to destroy a person’s reputation. Let me illustrate those qualities in action.



Years ago I was privy to the details of a very serious marital abuse situation involving a person in a church in which I served. First of all, this man needed to hear some very hard truth and we needed to be straightforward with him. We could not be “double-tongued” and hope that the marriage or his faith would be saved. We spoke the truth and, thanks be to God, he listened. Secondly, we needed to keep the shameful nature of his behaviour as private as possible. We needed to work to keep “slander” away from this couple. The team of “designated servants” who helped this man and his wife through their dark valley was kept small. Very few people in the church knew of the details. One of our goals in keeping the circle of the informed small was to recognize that there might come a day when this man would repent and would want to return to active life within the church. We didn’t want him to have to wear a “scarlet letter” for the rest of his life and so we kept confidence with him and his wife. To the glory of God, he did repent and he did return to active involvement and he and his wife are walking together in God’s grace to this day, partly because of the integrity of those “designated servants” who cared for him during the dark night of his soul.

Not only are deacons to be people who guard their speech, but they are also to be people who, as one Christian writer put it, are “not drunk on wine or money.” Deacons who are involved with people whose lives have been shattered by addictions need to be people who have their own passions and desires under the control of the Holy Spirit. They need to be trustworthy people who will not use the weakness and vulnerability of those to whom they minister as an opportunity for dishonest gain.

Thirdly, Paul focuses on...

The Spirituality of Service

Deacons, Paul wrote...

“must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience ...” 1 Timothy 3:9

The “mystery of the faith” does not refer to some special, secret information known only to a few people. Paul uses the term “mystery” several times in his letters to refer to truth that has been revealed from God in the life of Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 6:19, Paul refers to “the mystery of the Gospel” and deacons must understand the saving message of the cross of Christ. But as John Stott points out, the mystery of the faith is really “the sum-total of the revealed truths of the faith.”

Deacons have the opportunity to serve people who are facing some of life’s biggest challenges. They need to know what God’s Word says about dealing with sin and failure; about seeking God’s guidance and direction; about making right moral and ethical choices in relationships and in business; about healing



and prayer; about enduring hardship with grace. Deacons need to be fully grounded in God's Word and they need to live the truth they profess to believe. That's what Paul means when he says that they must hold to the faith with "a clear conscience."

Caring for the practical needs of people provides an amazing number of opportunities to minister to their spiritual needs as well. In this week's *Maclean's* magazine (Mar 15, 2010) there is a four-page information advertisement placed by Compassion Canada, a Christian child sponsorship organization. It tells the story of a young Ghanaian girl by the name of Charity. Charity was a troubled teen who was rejected by her family because of her behaviour. But the workers at the Compassion project in Ghana didn't give up on her. One of those workers, a Christian woman named Maggie, took Charity into her home. Maggie devoted herself and her family to prayer and fasting, asking God to show them his plan for this troubled girl.

The Lord laid it upon Maggie's heart to change Charity's name to "Queen Esther" and as they prayed for her, Charity, now called Queen, accepted Christ as her Saviour. Her life has been changed. She plans to attend school to study fashion design; she no longer does the self-destructive things she once did. "I do not do those bad things that I used to do," Queen said, "because I now belong to Jesus."

What first caught my attention as I scanned the pages of the magazine was the following bold statement, written in large letters. Compassion placed this story in *Maclean's* because they want people to know that...

"Poverty has an Eternal Solution. The difference in Queen's life is more than education, healthcare and social programs. The difference is Jesus."

When we meet practical needs in Jesus' name, doors open for God's truth to enter people's lives. As deacons care for practical needs they need to be prepared to enter those open moments with God's truth.

Fourthly, Paul emphasizes...

The Excellence of Service

While there is a degree of "on the job" training in all forms of Christian ministry, those who serve as "designated servants" are to come to their task only after they have been proven themselves fit. Paul wrote...

"let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless ... faithful in all things" 1 Timothy 3:10, 11



The word “tested” carries the sense of applying a test that is designed to prove the genuineness of something. And it seems that the testing is to be done by the church as a whole and the focus is on the person’s reputation and testimony for Christ. Is this person mature in their faith? Are they honest in their speech? Are they trustworthy with their money? Are good leaders in their homes? Are their lives self-controlled?

I believe that whenever our Nominating Committee sits down to do its work of presenting candidates for the positions of church officers, Deacons, Deaconesses and members of the Board of Management, they should read this portion of 1 Timothy and ask of the “designated servants” they present to us: do these people demonstrate these qualities? And when the membership of the church comes together to vote for these “designated servants,” I believe we need to read this portion again and ask ourselves the same question before we vote. That’s the kind of testing of which Paul is speaking.

A few years ago I attended a pastor’s conference in Louisville, Kentucky. During each session of the conference free books were given out to all the pastors in attendance and so by the end of the conference each of us must have had upwards of thirty to forty pounds of new books. At the end of the conference I flew out of Louisville on a small commuter plane together with perhaps twenty or so other pastors who had attended the conference. Our plane taxied to the beginning of the runway and stopped and then something happened that has never happened to me before on a flight. The pilot came on the intercom and told us that he needed to recalculate the weight of the cargo before he could take off and so there was going to be a short delay. It only took a second for many of us to realize what had happened: it was those books! We had thrown off the plane’s weight distribution by our overweight baggage. It took a few minutes for them to do the numbers and we then took off and landed safely.

I’m glad they did their test. It was designed to keep us from crashing and burning. Paul tells Timothy that deacons, and elders, need to be tested before they are set apart for service so that they won’t “crash and burn” while engaged in the work of Christ. The consequences for failure are devastating for them and for those whom they serve. What they’re doing is too important to leave to novices and the untested.

Fifthly, Paul reiterates what he said earlier (3:4-5) regarding the family as the training ground for ministry and he applies the same principle to the deacons. In doing so he highlights...

The Leadership of Service

Paul wrote...



“Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.” 1 Timothy 3:12

Three weeks ago we looked at the phrase “the husband of one wife” which also appears in verse 2 with respect to overseers and we noted that Paul’s focus is on a man’s faithfulness to his wife. The phrase appears in a mirror version applied to women in 1 Timothy 5:9 and I would suggest that a married woman who served as a deacon would also be evaluated for her faithfulness to her husband. In fact, it seems that women deacons in the early church were often widows who were tested by this criterion.

Today, however, I want to draw your attention to the word “manage.” The word in Greek combines two words which gives it the sense of “leading by serving.” (William Mounce) Two weeks ago we talked about “servant leadership” and we noted that Jesus set the model for us when he said...

“You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mark 10:43-45

If you want to know whether or not someone will serve the church well, take a look at how they serve their family. And by the way, I think Paul’s words here are intended to remind those of in Christian service, both fulltime and lay ministry, that our families are to get our best service, not the church.

Finally, Paul spoke of...

The Reward of Service

“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 3:13

As I said at the beginning: I am amazed by servants, and I’m not alone. Paul’s promise of reward for faithful service is being made good every day before my eyes in this church. I hear again and again of the gratitude people have for the work of the “designated” and undesignated servants of this church who have ministered help and kindness to people in need. Whether it’s a bowl of soup for a shut-in, a car ride for someone who needs to see a doctor, help with paying the rent or the construction of a work room for someone starting a home business, there are people in this church who are gaining “a good standing for themselves” by their practical care for others.



But more than a good reputation with others, those same people are reaping the reward that comes from the practical expression of their faith. Paul says that their “confidence in the faith” will grow as they serve the Lord. We follow “the One Who Serves” and when we join him in serving our understanding of his heart and mind grows right along with our service for him. And that in itself is reward enough.

But one day, every servant will stand before our Lord to receive a reward for our ministry. Thinking about that day, Steven J Cole, pastor of Flagstaff Christian Fellowship in Arizona, wrote...

One day I was jogging in the forest near my house when a question popped into my mind: What about John Spurgeon?

I admit, not many people are losing sleep over that question, but I had been reading the autobiography of the famous British preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. I was asking the Lord to bless my ministry like his. And then that question hit me, and I began thinking about John Spurgeon.

Ever heard of him? Until my recent reading, I never had. He was the father of Charles. He was himself a pastor and the son of a pastor. Yet if his son had not achieved such fame as a preacher, John Spurgeon would have served the Lord faithfully, gone to his grave, and we never would have heard of him.

Hundreds of pastors like him have walked with God, shepherded his flock for a lifetime, and gone to their reward without any notice in the sight of the world. As I jogged, I thought, Would I be willing to serve God faithfully and raise up my children to serve him, even if I never achieved any recognition? Even if no one but my own small congregation knew my name?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized, Yes! That's really what I want: to be faithful to the Lord in my personal walk, in my family, and in my shepherding of God's flock.

*The Lord never says, "Well done, good and **famous** servant", but he does say, "Well done, good and **faithful** servant."*

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Those are the words I long to hear. How about you? Let's orient our lives, by God's grace, to make it so and let's ask him for that grace right now.

- **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- **Closing Song: Make Me a Servant (#669)**



**Make me a servant, humble and meek;
Lord, let me lift up those who are weak.
And may the prayer of my heart always be:
Make me a servant,
Make me a servant,
Make me a servant today.**

- **Benediction**

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word. (2 Thess 2:16-17)

Go in peace, and serve the Lord in the power of the Spirit to the glory of the Father, Amen.