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SERVANTS: OFFICIAL & OTHERWISE

1 Timothy 3:8-13

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1 Timothy Lesson 10

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A farmer had a team of horses in which one horse consistently worked harder than the others. The farmer said, "They're all willin' horses. The one's willin' to pull, and the rest are willin' to let him."

Sadly, that's how it often is in the local church. Everybody is willing: a few are willing to work and the rest are willing to let them. Some of you old timers may remember the "Dobie Gillis" TV show from the late 1950's. Dobie's good buddy, beatnik Maynard G. Krebs, had the attitude that work was to be avoided at all costs. Whenever Dobie would say the word "work," Maynard would draw back in a reflex of horror and shriek, "Work!" A lot of people have the same notion—that work should be avoided whenever possible.

That attitude carries over into the Christian life. When it comes to serving in some practical way in the church, some Christians have a built-in reflex that causes them to run for cover. But a survey of the New Testament words "servant" (= "deacon"), "service," and "serve" reveals that

All Christians are servants;
some should be "official" servants.

All believers are called to be servants to the Lord and His church; some should be official servants with the title of "deacon" or "deaconess." Paul gives the qualifications for this office in our text, 1 Timothy 3:8-13. But in order to understand the office, we need to do a brief survey of "service" in the New Testament. Such a survey reveals that

1. All Christians are servants.

There are no exceptions. If a person is a follower of Jesus Christ, he or she will be developing into a servant. That is so because ...

A. Christ is our supreme example of servanthood.

Do you ever marvel that when God took on human flesh and came to this earth, He came as He did? God could have chosen for His Son to be born in Herod's palace, where He would have had the best of every worldly comfort. He would have eaten the finest foods, been pampered and waited upon for His every need. Instead He chose a poor carpenter and his wife! The Son of God grew up in a modest home where He learned the trade of His earthly father. His hands were not the soft hands of a nobleman, but the rough, callused hands of a carpenter.

As His disciples jockeyed for power and position, Jesus told them, "... whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26-28). On the night of His betrayal, when, if ever there was a time, Jesus needed to be served, He told His disciples, "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27). He demonstrated what He meant by rising from that supper, taking a basin of water and a towel, and performing the servant's task of washing the disciples' smelly, dirty feet. Jesus showed His disciples that ...

B. Christlikeness means serving.

In John 13:14-17 Jesus states, "If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

We all *know* these things. The question is, "Do we *do* them?" Do what? Wash smelly feet. Do the dirty, servant-jobs. Help people who may not be able to repay us. Such service is part and parcel of being a Christian. Everyone who knows Christ will be like Christ by acting like servants. No exceptions! But, we must also realize that ...

C. Christ has gifted some especially to serve.

There is a spiritual gift called the gift of "helps" (1 Cor. 12:28) or "service" (Rom. 12:7). While all Christians must serve in various

ways, some are specially gifted by God for service in supportive, practical, and often behind-the-scenes ways. Those with the gift of service are like the linemen on a football team. They don't usually share the limelight with the quarterback, but without their hard work and sacrifice, the quarterback couldn't begin to do his job.

Thus while some Christians will have the gift of serving and devote themselves to that area, all believers should be involved in a lifestyle of serving, because our Lord and Savior did not come to be served, but to serve and we are to be like Him.

A man used to visit a tiny country general store that had a clerk named Jake who seemed to be the laziest man on earth. One day he noticed that Jake wasn't around, so he asked the proprietor, "Where's Jake?" "Oh, Jake retired," the proprietor answered. "Retired, huh?" the man replied. "What are you going to do to fill the vacancy?" The owner replied, "Jake didn't leave no vacancy!"

I'm concerned that the same thing could be said of so many Christians with regard to their service for Christ: "They didn't leave no vacancy!" Every Christian should leave a vacancy when he or she moves on, because we're all called to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

But as you study further the concept of serving in the New Testament, it becomes apparent that ...

2. Some Christians should serve in a "official" capacity.

As the New Testament church developed, these "official" servants came to be known as "deacons" (= "servants").

A. The office of deacon is recognized in Scripture.

Most scholars agree that the office of "deacon" (= "servant") finds its roots in Acts 6:1-6. The church in Jerusalem had grown considerably. Apparently, many who had visited Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and were converted had stayed on to grow in their new-found faith in Christ. This created many material needs and led to the temporary arrangement of pooling resources (Acts 4:32) to meet the needs. There were a number of widows in the church without any means of income who were served food on a daily basis.

But a problem arose when the Greek-speaking Jews felt that their widows were being neglected in favor of the native Hebrews. They needed some fair administrators to handle the situation so that the apostles would be free to devote their time to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Although the word "deacon" is not used in Acts 6, it is generally agreed that these seven men were the prototype deacons. They assisted the apostles by serving in practical matters so that the apostles could serve in prayer and the Word. They were officially recognized and ordained for this task (Acts 6:6).

Later, when Paul wrote to the Philippian church, he addressed his letter to the overseers and deacons (Phil. 1:1), singling them out probably because of their role in the gift which the church had sent to Paul. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul also mentions these two offices in his instructions to Timothy. He does not mention deacons in his letter to Titus, perhaps indicating that the office of deacon is not mandatory for every church, but rather should emerge as a church grows and as the need arises. As a church grows, the elders will need help in the administrative details of the church so that they can concentrate on shepherding the flock. At that point, deacons can be recognized in an official capacity.

- B. The qualifications and rewards for deacons are spelled out in Scripture (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

As you examine the qualifications of the men chosen to serve in Acts 6 plus those of the men and women described by Paul in 1 Timothy 3, you can see that the requirements for being an official servant are high. We sometimes get the erroneous notion that if you're really spiritual, you can be an elder, but if you're only moderately spiritual, then you can be a deacon and help out in the more practical areas. But our text shows that those officially recognized as deacons must be spiritually mature men and women.

- (1) Qualifications for deacons (3:8-12):

Men deacons: There are eight qualifications:

- (a) "Dignified" (KJV = "grave"; NKJV = "reverent"; NIV = "worthy of respect"). The word is the opposite of being a goof-off or clown. A deacon should have a seriousness of

purpose about him, so that those he serves sense that he is concerned for them and so they trust and respect him.

- (b) "Not double-tongued" (NIV = sincere). He cannot be a man who tells one person one thing, but another person the opposite in an attempt to please everybody. Since the deacon was involved in handling church finances, he had to be a man of his word.
- (c) "Not addicted to much wine". Since wine was commonly served as a gesture of hospitality, it was important for a deacon, making his rounds from house to house, to exercise control or else he could become a drunkard.
- (d) "Not fond of sordid gain" (NKJV = "not greedy for money"; NIV = "not pursuing dishonest gain"). Since a deacon's duties often involved the distribution of money and gifts to the needy, there was always the possibility for embezzlement. A deacon could not be a man who would pursue dishonest gain.
- (e) "Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (the NIV's "deep truths" is misleading). The "mystery of the faith" is Paul's term for Christian truth, especially the gospel. It points to that which once was hidden, but now has been revealed in Christ. A deacon must be a man of conviction regarding the central truths of the Christian faith. In addition to sound doctrine, he must be sound in obedience ("clear conscience").
- (f) "Tested and found beyond reproach" (NIV = "if there is nothing against them"; KJV, NKJV = "blameless." The word is a close synonym of the word used for elders (3:2). It means, literally, "not called to account." This is to be determined by "testing," which means that a man has an observed track record before he is put into office. You don't put a man into office and then test him to see if he's trustworthy. Test him first and then recognize him.
- (g) "A one-woman man" (v. 12). As we saw in the case of elders, the term refers to a man of moral purity. A deacon often ministers to widows and single women, and thus it is especially important for him to be a man who is pure in thought and deed.

- (h) "Good manager of his children and household." As in the case of the elder, the home is the proving ground for the deacon. If he fails there, don't increase his responsibility.

From this list, it is obvious that the church should never recognize someone as a deacon in order "to get him involved," or because he's "willing to work." The real issue, as far as holding office in the church is concerned, is proven spiritual maturity, both for elders and deacons.

Women deacons: Right in the middle of his discussion about deacons, Paul inserts a verse about "women" (3:11). Then he returns to his discussion about deacons. The question is, does this refer to deacons' wives or to women deacons (or deaconesses)? In favor of the view that he is referring to the wives of deacons is the fact that the reference is sandwiched between the qualifications for deacon. It would seem that he would finish with one group before moving on to the next. But against that view is the fact that Paul doesn't mention any qualifications for the wives of elders. Why would he do this only for deacons' wives?

In favor of the view that Paul is referring to women deacons is the word "likewise" (parallel to 3:8). Also, in Romans 16:1, Phoebe is called a deacon ("servant") of the church. Women deacons could have been married to men deacons, or to elders or any other men, assuming that their children were raised so that they were free to serve; or they could have been widows or single women devoted to serving the Lord (5:3-16). They probably assisted the deacons in their duties, particularly in ministering to women in the church (Titus 2:2-5).

Paul mentions four qualifications for them:

- (a) "Dignified" (NIV = "worthy of respect"). This is the same word used for the men (3:8). They couldn't be goof-offs.
- (b) "Not malicious gossips" (KJV, NKJV = "not slanderers"). If they went from house to house with juicy tidbits of private information, they could ruin a church very quickly. They must be able to control their tongues.
- (c) "Temperate" (KJV = "sober"), the same quality as mentioned for elders. The word means clearheaded, able to make sound judgments. It refers to someone who does not live by emo-

tions, but by obedience to God's Word. Note that women leaders, as well as men, are required to have this quality. If she is swayed by emotion, she will not be able to lead needy women to God's truth, which is the only source of true healing for their problems. A woman needs to be able to discern truth from error if she is to serve effectively.

- (d) "Faithful in all things." She must be trustworthy. She must follow through on assigned tasks. If an elder knows of a family that needs care of some kind, and assigns it to a deaconess, he needs to be able to trust her to follow through.

After listing the qualifications for those who serve in an official capacity, Paul lists the rewards:

(2) Rewards for deacons (3:13):

- (a) "A high standing." This probably refers to respect in the church along with good standing in God's sight. Jesus humbled Himself by becoming a servant, and God highly exalted Him (Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus said, "Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted" (Matt. 23:12). A person who humbles himself and serves faithfully as a deacon will be rewarded. Even if the church doesn't notice, God will.
- (b) "Great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." This could refer both to confidence before God and before man. A faithful servant can go boldly before the Lord in prayer, knowing that he is doing God's will. Also, such a person can have a quiet confidence in dealing with people, knowing firsthand the reality of the Christian faith.

Conclusion

A number of years ago a *Newsweek* article (9/13/82) dealing with the Mideast conflict began:

HELP WANTED. Experienced negotiator to handle high-level talks among hostile nations. Objective: a just and durable peace. The successful candidate will be familiar with all facets of the situation—political, military and historical. Patience, flexibility and the ability to work long hours are a must. Apply: The White House, Washington, D.C. 20500.

The job description and the qualifications are tough because the job is so crucial. But someone higher than the President and with a job more crucial than peace negotiator is looking for qualified applicants. His help wanted ad might read:

Servant: Someone to do often undesirable work for the sake of the King of Kings. Needs to know the love of Jesus personally and be able to demonstrate it to others. Must live daily in personal contact with the greatest Servant of all in order to continue training. Work requires being on call 24 hours a day to meet needs of family, friends, and even strangers. Must be willing to give up his rights. Pay is often non-existent in this life, but great rewards in the next life. No experience necessary. On the job training begins today, right where you are. (Adapted from *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 10.)

Whether you're an official servant or otherwise, there are no job shortages if you're willing to wash dirty feet. Ask any elder and we'll find you an opening! Service is not an option for followers of the Son of Man who came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.

Discussion Questions

1. Agree/disagree: If you're not serving, you're too self-focused. Is every Christian a minister (servant)?
2. How can we promote a servant mentality in the church instead of a "serve-me" attitude?
3. Why are the requirements so high to be an official servant (deacon) in the church?

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