

The Big Picture: Three ingredients of a strong church (Phil. 1:1)...

1. There must be overseers who lead.
 2. There must be deacons who model.
 3. There must be saints who minister.
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 1. His wife is godly (11).
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1. God doesn't lower His standards.
 2. Rather, God brings people up to His standard.
 3. He does it through *Christ*.

When F.D.R. was president, the telephone rang in the office of a Washington church. A voice asked, "Will the President be in church this Sunday morning?" The wise minister replied, "That I cannot promise. But I do know the Lord will be present, and that should be sufficient incentive for a reasonably large attendance." (Les Flynn, *Twelve Apostles*)

People choose churches for all kinds of reasons. Some pick a church because of who's there. For others, it's the programs, or the worship, or a strong pulpit ministry.

I'm glad you're here today. You, no doubt, could be somewhere else, but you have chosen to be here. I'm thankful. I'm thankful for this church, and for what God is doing here.

Allow me to pose a question. What does it take to have a strong church? Hardly a week goes by, it seems, but that I get some promotional in the mail claiming to have the solution for church growth. And there may be value in some of it, but it seems to me we've made things too complicated. We need to go back to the Book, and reaffirm what the Master-Designer says about His church.

Remember, Jesus created the Church. He knows best what the church needs to be strong. And He's told us. Where? In His Word.

1 Timothy is like an owner's manual for established churches. Written by the apostle Paul and sent to his ministry associate Timothy, this letter deals with the subject of church life. There were things that needed to happen in the church at Ephesus where Timothy served if the church was to remain strong.

So what does it take to have a strong church? Before investigating 1 Timothy, I'd like to sketch the big picture and highlight three ingredients of a strong church.

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

The Big Picture: Three ingredients of a strong church (Phil. 1:1)...

According to Ephesians 2:20, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of the church. The church rests on Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no church. Without Jesus at the center, there is no strong church.

In addition, Ephesians 2:20 reveals that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Those were the men through whom God spoke to the early church, and whose message was eventually recorded in what we call the New Testament. So the foundation of a strong church is Christ and His Word.

But Christ is in heaven. So are the apostles and prophets. Since they're gone, how is the church to function now? What are the ingredients of a healthy church? Philippians 1:1 seems to suggest that organizationally there are three: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons."

Here's the big picture of God's design for the church. Notice the three ingredients: saints, overseers, and deacons. First...

1. *There must be overseers who lead.* Overseer is the same term used in 1 Timothy 3:1, translated "bishop" in the KJV. *Episkopos* is the Greek term. An overseer is a man (or men) who oversee a local congregation. Sometimes the Bible refers to the overseer as an "elder" (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5-7) or a "pastor" (Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2). To be a strong church there must be overseers who lead and whose leadership is grounded firmly on the foundation of Christ and His Word. Philippians mentions a second office...

2. *There must be deacons who model.* As we'll see momentarily in 1 Timothy 3, deacons work hand in hand with the overseers. The overseers proclaim the Word, whereas the deacons model the Word as servants (which is what the Greek term for "deacon" literally means). Thirdly...

3. *There must be saints who minister.* The Philippian letter was directed "to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi." Don't shy away from that term "saint." It's a good term. It applies to you if you know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Saints are Christians. Christians are saints. They're people who have been declared "holy" by God based on the atoning work of Christ.

We don't call each other *saints* very often, but we could. If you know Christ, you are a saint. May I hasten to say that the real ministry of the church happens at the *saint* level? To be a strong church, there must be overseers who will lead, and deacons who will model servanthood, but to move ahead, a church must have saints who will do the ministry.

Chew on that truth for a moment. Here's where front-lines ministry takes place. When Debra and Denise and others show the love of Christ to a pregnant teen at CRADLE. When Bea and Dara set up meals for grieving families. When Dan, Tom, JD, and Todd labor behind the scenes to make sure our facility is functional. When the teens and leaders rake leaves for our seniors. When Paul and Dale visit a recent attendee. When Lou & Ruth and Frankie and others take meals to shut-ins. That's ministry!

When Bob invites his doctor to supper to he can share the gospel with him. When Heinz talks to a friend at work about Christ and invites him to church. When Dave discusses the Bible when having lunch with a business associate. When Marsha, Joe, Dale, Dara and the choir work hard to prepare music that will help the congregation

celebrate Christ on Sundays. That's ministry! You are the feet and hands of the Body of Christ that do the ministry, and touch lives.

But a body needs structure if it's to move efficiently, a skeletal system. So the Body of Christ needs structure. That's what 1 Timothy 3 is all about. Yes, the saints do the ministry, but God designates some of the saints to lead the Body (overseers/elders/pastors). And some He designates to be models for the Body (deacons). If a church is to be strong, it needs leaders who will study the Book and say, "Here's what the Savior calls us to do." And it needs saints who will say, "Yes, we'll do it." But it needs something else, deacons, who will lock arms with the leaders and model how ministry is to be done.

What is a deacon anyway? Who can be a deacon? And for that matter, why would anyone want to? We find the answers to those questions in 1 Timothy 3. The first seven verses of the chapter give us the qualifications for overseers, a text we explored two weeks ago. Then we come to 1 Timothy 3:8-13, a passage in which we discover three insights about the deacon.

I. It's a special position (8a).

Listen to verses 8-10, "Deacons, likewise, are to be men 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 is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons."

To be a deacon is to hold a special position. What does God expect a deacon to do, anyway? There is no job description in this text, but the word itself would suggest a twofold task for the deacon.

A. His task is to serve. The Greek term for "deacon" is *diakonos*, which literally means, "a humble servant." Sometimes the word is translated "minister." By definition, then, a deacon is one who serves. Don't miss that. First and foremost, a deacon is a servant who, by God's design, works hand in hand with the overseers. That means, in Scriptural terms, a deacon is not merely a "board" member who pushes paper around in meetings (though one way to serve is through administration). He is a man who rolls up his sleeves and serves in the church. In addition...

B. His task is to model service. The seven men mentioned in Acts 6 were not technically deacons, but they represent a vivid picture of the role of a deacon. Remember the story? The apostles were being overwhelmed with the ministry of the growing church, particularly in the care of widows. So what was the solution? They appointed seven, Spirit-filled men to serve the widow's tables so the apostles could devote themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word. The seven men were given the task of "serving."

That's what a deacon is to do. He is to serve. Deacons assist the elders so they can devote themselves to teaching and prayer.

"But wait," you say. "I thought it was the job of the saints to do the ministry." It is, according to Ephesians 4:12. "But you just said that's what the deacons do." That's right. The deacons are to serve, but in so doing they are to model service for the saints.

We're all called to serve (Gal. 5:13). But God has graciously placed some role-models in His church. Deacons. They are to show the saints how to serve. I'm quite confident that in Acts 6, it wasn't just the Seven who served the widows, though indeed,

they rolled up their sleeves. In addition to serving, they modeled service. They mobilized the saints for service.

So in God's eyes, it's a special position. Who qualifies then? Insight #2...

II. It takes a special person (8b-12).

Verse 8 begins, "Deacons likewise." That is, just like a church must look for certain criteria for men who would be overseers, so must it do with aspiring deacons. Paul lists some nine qualifications for deacons in verses 8-12. Some traits are positive, some negative. It's a checklist of sorts. What kind of person can be a deacon? God's Word says to look for a man with four credentials.

A. Credential #1: He has a godly testimony (8). To be a deacon a man must be "worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain." Simply put, to be a deacon a man must have a godly testimony.

Deacons are to be men *worthy of respect* ("grave" as the KJV puts it). The word means "serious, reverent." It depicts a man of dignity, a man who is respectable, a man who takes His role as a servant seriously.

Frankly, if a man has a frivolous attitude towards spiritual things, he is not qualified to be a deacon. Why not? Because he is to be a role model. That implies that a person who assumes the office of deacon merely to "fill a position" isn't qualified. A deacon must use the office, not just fill it, for the good of the church and the glory of God (Wiersbe).

He must be *sincere* ("not double tongued"). That's an insightful word. It means "given to repetition." It describes a person who says one thing to one person, and something else to the next person. Public figures are tempted to do that, you know. Stretch a little truth here, leave out a little truth there, just to make themselves look good. That's unacceptable for a deacon. He must be a man whose word is as good as gold.

Not indulging in much wine is next. The participle means "to turn one's mind to," or "to occupy oneself with," hence the NASB translation, "addicted to." A deacon, then, is not to be preoccupied with drink nor to allow it to influence his life (MacArthur).

What would Paul say about drinking if he were alive today? I think Homer Kent's observation is accurate:

"It is extremely difficult for the twentieth-century American to understand and appreciate the society of Paul's day. The fact that deacons were not told to become total abstainers, but rather to be temperate, does not mean that Christians today can use liquor in moderate amounts. The wine employed for the common beverage was very largely water. The social stigma and the tremendous social evils that accompany drinking today did not attach themselves to the use of wine as the common beverage in the homes of Paul's day. Nevertheless, as the church grew and the Christian consciousness and conscience developed, the dangers of drinking came to be more clearly seen. The principle laid down elsewhere by Paul that Christians should not do anything to cause a brother to stumble came to be applied to the use of wine. Raymond states it this way:

'If an individual by drinking wine either causes others to err through his example or abets a social evil which causes others to succumb to its temptations, then in the interests of Christian love he ought to forgo the temporary pleasures of drinking in the interests of heavenly treasures.'

"Certainly in present-day America, the use of wine by a Christian would abet a recognized social evil, and would set a most dangerous example for the young and the weak. To us, Paul would undoubtedly say, 'No wine at all.'"

The issue isn't *could* a man drink? It's *should* he? In our day when countless homes are being destroyed by alcohol and substance abuse, a deacon must pave a trail for others to follow.

In addition, deacons are those who are *not pursuing dishonest gain* ("not greedy of filthy lucre"). That makes sense when you realize that in Paul's day, as now, the deacons have access to the finances and benevolent moneys of the church. It can be tempting to handle money that is not your own. That's why a deacon must be trustworthy, not greedy.

Simply put, to be a deacon a man must have a godly testimony. That's credential #1.

B. Credential #2: He knows the Word (9). "They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience." Dwight Eisenhower once said, "You don't lead by hitting people over the head. That's assault, not leadership." A deacon candidate is a man who gives evidence that he is living his life in submission to a higher authority than himself--the Word of God. Before a man can be a leader, he must exhibit that he's a follower, a follower of the Book.

Verse 9 indicates that deacons "must hold the deep truths of the faith," the "mystery of the faith," as the KJV puts it. Don't think of Sherlock Holmes when you read that word "mystery." In the NT, "mystery" refers to revealed truth that was previously hidden, hence, "deep truths" as the NIV puts it. "The faith" is a reference to the content of New Testament truth.

To be a deacon, a man must have a handle on the truth of God's Word. He must know it and live it.

It's critical that we see this. God calls deacons to do more than serve as business managers who do things like balance the budget (as important as that is). Theirs is a spiritual ministry, not merely a social ministry, and certainly not simply a business venture.

They must know the Word. Whereas an overseer must be able to teach the Word (2), a deacon must know the Word so as to help protect its contamination by false doctrine or faulty living.

C. Credential #3: He is a proven servant (10). "They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons." That's interesting. Please notice that it takes more than desire to be a deacon. It requires accountability and evaluation. They must "first be proved," as the KJV puts it. One commentator (J.N.D. Kelly) makes this observation, "Paul's language seems to suggest that the scrutiny was stricter for deacons than for overseers; the term 'testing' is not used of choosing the latter."

A man might say, "I've prayed about it, and I believe God wants me to be a deacon." Should his name be put on the ballot? Not necessarily. He must be "tested" or "proven."

When I played High School basketball, I used to dread the month of November. The hardest part of the basketball season, in my opinion, was November. That was the month of preseason practice. No games, just conditioning, drills, and working on the basics over and over. What was the purpose of the preseason? A key one was this. You had to prove yourself ready to play in the game. To be honest, some guys who had tons of talent weren't willing to prove themselves, so they didn't play.

To be a deacon, a man must be proven servant. How does he prove himself? Here's a checklist of indicators to help determine if a man has proven himself ready to be a deacon:

1) Is he *faithful* to the church? Once a man becomes a deacon, it will be his responsibility to support the church, its leadership and direction. Has he given such evidence yet? Does he come regularly to the church services? Is he faithful? 2) Does he like to *serve*? Has serving in the church been a priority to him? When ministries needed help, was he available? When work days were announced, did he come? 3) Is he a man of the *Book*? Has he given evidence that he has a solid grasp of biblical doctrine? 4) Has he done *other jobs* well in the church? If he's been a trustee, was he reliable? If an Awana worker, did he just "do the job" or did he really serve the children? 5) Does he have *good relationships* with people? Does he give evidence that people are important to him? Does he interact with people before and after worship services?

If the answer to the questions is "yes," verse 10 indicates the man has proven himself, and when men have proven themselves, "let them serve as deacons." A fourth credential...

D. Credential #4: He has a God-honoring family (11-12). How can you tell if that's the case? If the candidate has a God-honoring family, you'll see two evidences.

1. *His wife is godly (11)*. "In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything." "Their wives" is literally "the women." Some suggest it refers to a third church office, *deaconesses*, female deacons. That's possible, but in light of the fact that verse 12 continues the discussion of a deacon's qualifications, I take it that verse 11 is not dealing with a separate office, but is elaborating on a key qualification for the deacon. His wife must be a godly woman.

How can you tell if a woman is godly? Paul mentions four indicators--in her *walk* and *talk* is she *stable* and *able*? If a deacon's wife is godly, you'll see it in her *walk*--she must be "worthy of respect" ("grave," the same word used of the deacon in verse 8). You'll hear it in her *talk*--she won't be a "malicious talker" (a "slanderer"). Literally the phrase is "not devil-like." Remember, the devil is the accuser. He loves to stir up things. A deacon's wife must not. Indeed, a woman who slanders with her tongue disqualifies her husband from service as a deacon.

In addition, she must be *stable*--"temperate" (sober-minded), and *able*--"trustworthy in everything" (faithful). If a man is to be a deacon, his wife must be faithful and reliable. Why? Because it will be *their* ministry, not just his. A second evidence...

2. *His household is in order (12)*. "A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well." To be a deacon, a man must have his house in order. He must be a "one woman man." Though I don't think this prohibits single men from serving as deacons, if a man is married, he must have a godly marriage.

In addition, he must "rule his children well," as the KJV puts it. There must be no question who is leading in his home. His children are not perfect, but they are disciplined. His children do not "run" the home. When problems arise, he deals with them biblically.

Furthermore, the text says he manages his "household" well. A man's household includes his wife and children, but more than that. He must have his finances in order.

You won't see his name in the newspaper for writing bad checks. If you visit his home, you'll see Christ, not chaos.

Perhaps you're thinking, "Wow! God's standard is high. Why would anyone want to be a deacon?" That brings us to insight #3: it's a special position; it takes a special person,

III. It yields special privileges (13).

Like what? Here are two: "Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus." Camp on that word *well*. It's possible to fill a slot as a deacon and not serve *well*. I am grateful that God has given our church deacons who do serve well, and I would commend Don, Gary, Ray, and Dale publicly.

And what privileges does God extend to deacons who serve well? First, they gain an excellent standing. We might say they are put on a pedestal. That's not sin because they didn't seek it, but the truth is, God exalts those who humble themselves (James 4:10). When deacons serve well they are honored by those they serve.

Secondly, they gain great assurance (boldness, confidence) in their faith. When deacons serve well, it breeds confidence. It gives them assurance that God is pleased. And what could be more rewarding than knowing that?

I'd like to share with you a true story about a couple I knew. Evan and Ruby were wonderful servants in their church. They cleaned the facility faithfully for years. When there was a wedding, they threw in the extra touches without being asked. Then one day Evan came down with Parkinson's disease. He cleaned until the disease sapped the very life out of his limbs, and all he could do was stay at home.

Do you know what the people of the church did for Evan and Ruby? When Evan's health got to the point where he couldn't come to church anymore, some of the men took turns going to the house on Sunday mornings. They would sit with Evan so Ruby could participate in the church worship services. Do you know what kind of impact it has on a community when people see church members serving each other like that?

God gives churches deacons as a reminder that serving is what the church is all about. We're all to serve, and deacons are to show us how.

Would you reflect on a question? How committed are you to your church? I'm not talking about being committed to this building, or even to your ministry. How committed are you to serving the other people in this assembly? Is serving in your church a priority to you? The fact that God designed the office of deacon says serving is priority *to God*.

The text we've studied today is more than a pragmatic, how-to-text. Yes, it tells us how to choose deacons, but fundamentally, it teaches us something about God.

Implications: What do we learn about God from this text? I see three implications...

1. *God doesn't lower His standards.* God's standard for leadership is high, isn't it? In fact, it's too high for any person to attain on his own strength. The solution isn't to lower the standard. God has a better way. God doesn't lower His standards. Rather...

2. *Rather, God brings people up to His standard.* That's true in salvation, right? God is holy. We are not holy. So what did God do? Lower His holy standard? No. He provided a way to bring us up. He sent His Son. Jesus came to earth to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. He lived a perfect life--He attained the standard. And then He died to pay the penalty we deserved for falling short of the standard. And then He

rose again, and today offers eternal life to all who will trust in Him. If you trust in Christ, God brings you up to His standard by giving you the merit of Christ's accomplishments.

And what's true in salvation is true in service, too. If your life doesn't match the standard we've seen today, don't attack the standard. Submit to the Savior. Ask Him to bring you up.

God's way is so much better than man's. Man lowers the standard (if you doubt that, remember what's happening in Washington these days). But there's hope in God's way. God doesn't lower His standards. Rather, he brings people up to His standard. How?

3. *He does it through Christ.* Christ is the remedy.