

## Deacons: Ministers to the Needs and to the Needy – Acts 6:1-7

**Introduction** – Along with the office of elders, the church quickly testified to the office of deacon, with similar qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-13) but with different functions. We only have one passage of Scripture that seems to give us an indication of what that function entails (Acts 6:1-7). A study of the ministry of the diaconate in light of the ministry of the elders and the overall commission of the church makes clear that the work of the gospel through the Spirit-empowered church is to serve the whole man and, even greater, all of humanity. In a very real way, deacons serve the church in such a way as to display her as the hands and feet of Jesus to a lost and needy world.

**Diakonos** – The word is transliterated “*deacon*,” referring to this office in 1 Tim 3:8, 12 and Phil 1:1. But the word shows up many more times in the New Testament. They are the king’s servants in the Parable of the Marriage Feast (Matt 22:13), and they are the servants addressed by Mary when Jesus turns the water into wine (John 2:9). Jesus tells us that the greatest among us will be our servant (*diakonos* - Matt 23:11). It is often translated minister. Paul is a *deacon* of the gospel (Col 1:23) and Timothy is a *deacon* of God (1 Thess 3:2). We learned that Jesus is our Chief Elder (1 Pet 5:4); He is also the Chief *Deacon* to the circumcision (Rom 15:8). What we learn from these non-office uses of the word is that the word denotes one who serves, waits upon others, and administers and bestows on behalf of other authorities.

**Deacons and the Growth and Care for the Church** (Acts 6:1-7) – During the early days following Pentecost, the church multiplied “*to many thousands*” (Matthew Henry), and there arose a complaint. Many Greek-speaking Jews had come to faith, but their widows were not being cared for in the daily *diakonia* (v1). The apostles, serving as the elders of this new, fast-growing church knew they must not leave “*the word of God*,” for they needed to be fed in this way as well (v2). And so they turned to the disciples and asked them to nominate men to care for these needs (v3). They would be serving in the name of Jesus and on behalf of the church and so it was critical that they be men “*of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*.” Then, the apostles would be able to give themselves to prayer and to the *diakonia* of the word (v4). The people chose and the apostles laid hands on them. The result of this careful obedience appears to be that “*the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith*” (v7).

**Ministers to the Needs and to the Needy** – The deacons then, ministered in two directions. First, they served the teachers of the Word by receiving a delegated task from them and administering that responsibility on their behalf. Second, they ministered to the needy in the midst of the congregation. The church is to provide spiritual food but it is not to neglect the physical needs of those in their midst. Neglecting the first leads to shallow doctrine, false teaching, and an impotent gospel; neglecting the second leads to Gnosticism and hypocrisy, embittering people to the gospel. Taking responsibility and administering both leads to a vibrant, growing work of God.

**Loving your Neighbor and Loving God** (Luke 10:25-42) – The commands of God might be summarized, “*love God and love your neighbor as yourself*.” When the lawyer asked, “*who is my neighbor*” Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Those who identified themselves as loving God (a priest and a Levite) refused to love this neighbor, to care for his need. But Jesus is in the business of removing burdens and so the Samaritan shows Himself to be more like Jesus and more like the people of God are to be. Faithfulness will bring about faithful actions and deeds that imitate our Lord’s compassion and message of grace.

**But Martha...** – These stories are next to each other on purpose. That is because one can take the story above (as many denominations have) and say that it doesn’t matter what you believe or who you worship, it only matters what you do for others. Martha is frantically serving her guests and angry that Mary is not helping. Mary is simply sitting the feet of Jesus and listening to His words. But that is what a disciple must do as well – even first. And that is how a church must be led and how a gospel must be preached as well – focused upon the Word and upon the object of that Word, Jesus Christ.

**The Test of Mercy** (James 2:13-17, 1 John 3:16-18) – These similar passages help put this work of ministry, and the work of the deacons, in better perspective. James makes clear that a profession of faith unaccompanied by deeds of mercy shows that faith to be “*dead*,” or not genuine. John teaches that real love is expressed in deed as well as in word. Both are needed for true gospel work and for real church life to take place.

**Deacons** – The work of the deacons is based on Christ as their model and they become a model for the whole church. Jesus has come as the High Priest to give mercy to all in need. He comes as the great Deacon to minister to our deepest needs; He is the Son of Man who did not come to be served, but to serve. He came preaching to the poor (Matt 11:1ff) and identifying with the poor (2 Cor 8:9), and in word and deed, He reconciles us to Himself and to one another. The ministry of the diaconate takes care of the needs of the church, and then leads the church in seeking out the needy to serve in the name of and as part and parcel to the gospel of Jesus.