

The Duties of a Deacon, 3

Romans 16:1-2

Pastor Jeremy Cagle, July 14, 2019

We're talking about the creation of a brand new position, and that is the position of Deacon. And to do that, I would like to invite you to turn in your Bibles to the book of Romans. So, if you have your Bible with you this morning, if you would, please turn with me to the book of Romans.

And as you're doing that, if you're joining us for the first time this morning, we just finished a series on the book of Titus called the "How to Plant a Church" series because that's what the book of Titus is about. It tells us how to plant a church, how to get it started and off the ground. And in doing so, Titus had a lot to say about the elders. If you read Titus chapter 1, maybe later at another time, you can read all kinds of good information about elders there. But Titus didn't say anything about deacons. For whatever reason, he left them out. And so, before we move on from this topic, I thought it would be good to go back and talk about them. This is just a three part series. We're finishing it this morning.

And just to review what we've talked about in the previous weeks, if you do a survey of the New Testament, you will see that the Lord gave us two offices for the church or three, depending on how you look at it. He gave us the office of elder, the office of deacon and the office of deaconess. There's a little discrepancy as to whether there is an office of deaconess or not, and we're going to talk about that in a moment. But that's it. That's all He gave to the church. Three offices; elder, deacon, deaconess. And the office of deacon is created to serve. That's what it does. It was created primarily to help people who are in need.

The word "deacon" comes from the Greek word *diákonos* which means "servant" because that's what they do. The deacons "deak" or they serve and help people. I told you before about the man who came to his pastor and he said, "Pastor, I just became a deacon, what do I do?" And the pastor said, "Well, you're a deacon, go deak, go serve. That's what they do." Because service is that important to God. It says a lot about our Lord, that He created one office in the church particularly to do this because service is near to His heart.

To say it another way, God created the office of deacon to remind us that this is what the Christian life is all about. This is what we all should be doing. We all should be serving one another. Deacons are called to do the same thing we're all called to do, and they just set an example for that.

If you think about it, the way some churches operate, they seem to forget this. The way some Christians act, they need this reminder because they act like they hate serving others. They act like they don't ever want to do it. You have to beg them to do anything. I knew a church in Illinois like this that had 20 people in it and 15 different bank accounts, so they could pay people to serve. Otherwise, there'd be nothing ever done. The church had grown so cold and it had grown so callous in its ministry that they had to pay people to do everything. Someone left a large donation, someone left a lot of money and they used it that way. They divided it up and paid everybody to do the ministry. And over time the money dried up, so did the ministry. And the church died because God doesn't bless a church like that. He doesn't bless a selfish spirit.

Jesus said, if you remember, He said, “Freely you have received, freely give.” God didn't hand you a receipt or a bill of sale when He saved you. He saved you freely, and now you go and freely give. He also said, Jesus said, “It's more blessed to give than to receive.” Why? Because that's what God does. He gives and gives and gives again. The Desiring God website recently posted an article called “Five Bad Reasons to Go to Church,” and one of them was to hear about yourself. It said, “The church is not about you, it's about God. The church is not about your fame and glory and name, it's about His, and so you go to serve.” Which is what the office of deacon is all about. These are the chief servants of the church. These are the guys that lead the way in serving others. This is what I love about the deacons, because you never know what they're going to be doing in the church. You see a deacon, you never know what he's going to have on his hands and how much dirt he's going to have on his face. I've seen deacons on lawn mowers, I've seen them on tractors, I've seen them on people's roofs cleaning out their gutters, and I've seen them weeping with someone in the pew over their sin. That's a servant. They'll do whatever it takes for the church, and we can all learn from their example. There is no task too low for a deacon because they're humble servants of God.

And with that said...that's all a review of what we've talked about the past couple of weeks...But with that said, there's one more aspect to this office I want us to look at today. There's one more thing we need to consider concerning the deacons, and that is the office of deaconess. It's the office of deaconess or the female deacons. We need to talk about whether the church should have female deacons or not. I mentioned to you a moment ago, there's some discrepancy about that. There is some different views as to whether there should be this office. So, let's talk about that in our last sermon on this subject.

If you take a look at church history and go back as far as we can, you will see that the church has always had female deacons. Not every church, but some churches. Not every congregation, but many of them have. This is an office that's been around for a long time. So, for instance, Clement of Alexandria writing in the second century, just one century after the New Testament, essentially, he said this, he said, “But the apostles in conformity with their ministry concentrated on preaching and teaching, and they took Christian women around them to be deaconesses, so that the Word of God could penetrate into the woman's quarters without scandal or shame.” So, according to Clement in the second century, the tradition had been passed down to him that there should be deaconesses in the church. And their job was to help the Word of God penetrate into the women's quarters without shame. You can imagine if you sent man into the woman's quarters to council and meet one-on-one with women, that could be really problematic. And so, Clement said early on, the church sent ladies to do that and they nominated them – deaconesses.

John Chrysostom, writing shortly after this, said that there were 40 deaconesses at his church in Constantinople, and they did all sorts of things. They had all sorts of roles. But one interesting thing they did, was to help women who were undergoing persecution. You see the service mindset there. But one thing that early female deacons would do is they would step in and help women who were under attack by the government or by their enemies.

And we could mention other examples of this in church history. The office has been around for a long time. And there are several passages that people go to for this, and one of them is Romans chapter 16. So, if you want to turn over there with me to the end of the book of Romans, just to see an example of a deaconess in the Bible or a passage people go to for this.

Richard did a really good job with this chapter by the way. I was wondering when I was reading this, who was going to read this on Sunday because I was really looking forward to that. And he did a great job. I remember a country brother in Illinois who would always pronounce the word "Athens" as "A-thens." And I'd always think that's not Scripture but anyway, it was kind of fun." But Romans 16:1-2. Let's read that together just so you can kind of see where this idea comes from in some people's minds. It says verse 1, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well."

Now, when you read that, it doesn't sound like it says anything about female deacons, but let me just point a few things out to you here. For one, the word "servant" in verse 1 is *diakanon* or deaconess. It's the female version of the word "deacon." The Revised Standard Version of the Bible actually translates it this way - it says this, it says, "I commend to you (this is the RSV translation) our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea." So, you see the word there. There you see the idea. Phoebe was a deaconess of the church, a servant or a female deacon. Now some say that simply means that she was a servant and nothing more. She was just your average Christian. And that is a valid position. You can interpret it that way. But I think with all the circumstances going on in this book, it probably refers to something more.

As many of you know, the book of Romans is about the Gospel. It's about the power of God for salvation. Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." And because of this, Paul had a lot to say in this book. Because he was writing about the Gospel, because he was writing about an important subject to him, he had a lot to tell us. And he gave us one of the largest letters in the Bible in the New Testament.

I did some research on this. The average letter in the first century came to about a hundred words or so. If you read through the New Testament, you come to the book of Philemon, that was the size of your average letter in the first century; the book of Philemon. In comparison, the book of Romans has 7,000 words in it. It had 7,000 words in Greek. It is 70 times larger than your normal letter. Some have speculated it would have cost thousands of dollars to write this on parchment.

And Paul with this priceless, very expensive treasure, put it in the hands of one woman, her name is Phoebe. When Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord," that means, "Phoebe is the one bringing this letter to you. Phoebe is the person who is responsible for this thousand-dollar document. She will put it in your hands."

I don't know of any other woman in the Bible who had that distinction. I don't know of any other woman who had the privilege of carrying something like this. It's a very unusual thing. All the other messengers that we know of in the New Testament were men. And if you read between the lines here, it seems that one of the things that qualified her to do this was this title or this privilege of *diakanon* - deaconess. Now, some don't interpret it that way. I understand, and we'll get into that in a moment. But that's where the thinking comes from. I want you to see that. That's where people get this office. This is one of the passages. Men like Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, churches today do this as well. The idea is that the church affirmed her in her hometown of Cenchrea. They gave Phoebe their stamp of approval

by giving her an office, the office of servant, and now, Paul is saying, “I want you to give her your stamp of approval too. Receive this document that she's bringing you. Trust her and trust the letter that she brings.” Paul says, “I wouldn't ask anybody to do this. I wouldn't trust such a treasure in anyone's hands. I gave it to a deaconess.”

And that's what I want us to look at today, just to get our minds around this discussion of this position. I want us to look at what he says about Phoebe and this office that she has. So, if you're taking notes in Romans 16:1-2, I want you to see three characteristics of a deaconess in the church. That's our outline for today. It's pretty simple; three characteristics of a deaconess in the church.

And I'll say about this in a moment. Some of you may have different thoughts on this and that's okay. I do want to be clear, there's not a lot of details about this position in the Bible. The Bible doesn't say a lot about it, which is why there's so many different views on it. But in all fairness, the Bible doesn't say a lot about deacons either. There's only a few passages that talk about deacons. It doesn't say about other offices like the office of prophetess in the Old Testament. If you've ever read through the Old Testament, you'll come across prophetess, and there's not a lot of information about that or a female judge. There's a female judge in the Old Testament as well. And it seems like this office would fall into that category. But let's talk about that this morning with three characteristics of a deaconess in the church.

The first one is this, she is commendable. The first characteristic we see of Phoebe or this idea of a deaconess in this passage is that she's a commendable woman. Just like it was with the deacons, she is someone who was held in high esteem by the church because she has high character. She is commendable. If you look in Romans 16:1 again, Paul writes this, he says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchræa.”

Just to walk you through this a little bit, Paul usually ends his letters with a personal greeting. He usually ends them with a few words of encouragement just like everyone did in the first century. Since letters were so expensive, since they cost so much to write ... we've studied this before, but they would often - the interesting thing about studying parchments is parchment was so precious. They would often erase things that they'd written and write over it again and send the same parchment back to someone. We just throw paper away, we just hit delete on the computer, but they would write over it. They wouldn't put any space between the words. So, if you see a Greek parchment today, there's no spaces, it's just written straight across the page, top to bottom, corner to corner. And since it was so costly to do this, you would always say something to your friends at the end of a letter. Even if it was a theological treatise or a business letter like Romans kind of was, you would talk to your friends. And in Romans 16, Paul gives us his largest greeting in the New Testament. There are 26 names in this list. Now, we're going to go through them together - I'm just kidding. Do you guys like that? Go through them in detail.

But they all start off with the name Phoebe. Not as a member of the church in Rome, but as the bearer of the letter. They start with the name Phoebe. Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe.” From what we can tell, she was a Gentile because her name “Phoebe” is one of the names of the Roman god, Apollo. Her name means “bright” or “radiant.” It would be kind of similar to our name, Joy, kind of a pretty name.

It says, “She is a servant of the church at Cenchræa.” That was a city on the eastern side of Corinth, which was a dangerous place. On the outskirts of a town that was kind of like the

first century version of Las Vegas, just a city for known for its sin. Which means that Phoebe wouldn't have traveled alone. There's no way a woman would do that in the first century from a town like that. She would have had a team of men traveling with her, probably armed men.

And the interesting thing about this in Romans 16 is that her name is the only one that is mentioned in the list. She's the only person mentioned in her group to the Romans, and that could be because of her office. That's a plausible explanation for that. She's the only one mentioned because she's the only one the Romans need to recognize. She's an office bearer in the church.

It would have been very unusual in the first century to ask a woman to deliver a letter like this. That was kind of strange. And it would have been even more unusual to mention her name before you mentioned the name of any men. They had a very low view of women in the first century. There must've been a reason for that, and the most likely answer is that she was a deaconess in the church. The church in Cenchrea recognized her. Paul says, "I recognize her as well. I commend her to you."

The word "commend" comes from the Greek word *sunistao*, which means "to welcome with strength" or "to welcome with gusto." It means, "I wholeheartedly approve of her. She has my full support. She's doing more than your average Christian and you should support her as well." I've seen some of you welcome people that you haven't seen in a while. They come through the door, they surprise you, and you guys just light up like a Christmas tree. And I almost think you're going to tackle them. I got to kind of protect you in the lobby there. It's like you're so happy to see this person. I think you can send text messages and stuff and they let you know, but they just come in and shock and you love it. That's the kind of reception Paul tells them to give Phoebe.

This is an interesting perspective on this. In his commentary on Romans, Donald Grey Barnhouse says, "Never was there a greater burden carried by such tender hands. The theological history of the church throughout the centuries was contained in this single manuscript which she brought with her. The Reformation was in her baggage. The Great Awakening was as well. The blessing of multitudes was carried in these parchments by a single woman named Phoebe. Needless to say, what she did was very, very commendable." I'll mention this in a moment. Could you imagine what the church would be like today without the book of Romans? I mean, it wouldn't be the same church. And it was placed into the hands of - I like to think of her as being five foot tall and very small. It was placed in her hands to bring it to us.

We don't always think about this, but there is a Biblical precedent for honouring people who do more than is expected of them in the church. There is a precedent for commending them and welcoming them with gusto. We're all called to serve the Lord, we're all called to help others, but there's a place to honour those who go above and beyond the call of duty. Ship voyages were very expensive in the ancient world and dangerous. I mean, you could die on a ship in the first century. I've told you before that for a long time, mission agencies would not send a mission team together on a ship for fear it would sink. What they would do is they would split the team up into different ships. That way, if one ship goes down, the team is still saved. That's the kind of thing Phoebe is doing here for the Lord. She's risking her life to bring this letter to the Romans, and Paul tells them, "I commend her for that." The story is told all the time an old missionary couple was coming home after 40 years of service in Africa. They were coming home on board a ship. And as they got off, a band was playing and

there were banners everywhere saying, “Welcome home” and “We missed you.” Which really encouraged them until they realized it was all for somebody else. It was for a soldier coming home from war. And when they realized that, the husband turned to his wife and he said, “That's okay because we're not home yet. Our reward is in heaven.” Which is true. That's absolutely true, and we need to remember that. But we also need to remember to honour people like that today. When people make a commitment like that to the Lord, we should break out the bands and break out the banners and welcome them with gusto.

When I look out across our church here, I think this is so easy for us to do because we have so many servants. We have so many people that bless the Lord in our church. Now, some of you come here every Sunday morning before I do, and you leave every Sunday morning after. Rain, snow, sleet or shine or rain or rain or rain or rain. (It rains a lot around here.) It doesn't stop you guys. You come every week, unlock the doors, turn on the lights, set up the sound equipment, and you should be commended for that. You should be encouraged for what you do. You do it for Christ, which is commendable. Others of you go out and evangelize every month. You go out and share the Gospel with the lost boldly, faithfully. I've been with you guys and there's nobody you won't walk up to and talk to about Christ. A couple times, I've been with you and I think, “No, no, no, don't go talk to that person, he looks dangerous.” And off you go, and I'm like, “Come back here.” I love it. You should be encouraged for that. Some of you do the music every week. Some of you set up the coffee every week. Some of you visit shut-ins, you pray with them. Some of you work with the kids, you work with the youth, you counsel people. But whatever it is, there is a Biblical precedent for honouring those who serve, especially when it's over and above the call of duty like we see here. A. W. Tozer said you go to church once a week and nobody will notice, but if you worship the Lord and serve Him seven days a week, people will think you're strange. But that's okay because that's what God requires. We can learn from the example of a woman like this, a woman like Phoebe who was worshiping the Lord seven days a week.

And it leads to our next point, it leads to the next characteristic of a deaconess in this passage. The first one is that she is commendable. She should be held in high esteem by the church, not just her church in Cenchrea, but the Roman church, the church everywhere. She should be held in high regard because she's doing more than is expected of her. And it leads to the next characteristic that goes along with that one. And that is that she should be received in a manner worthy of the saints or she should be accepted as a deaconess – you can interpret it either way. But the second characteristic of a deaconess is that she should be received in a manner worthy of the saints, or she should be accepted as a deaconess. Because of her excellent service, because she is so commendable, Paul says the Romans should accept the office the Lord has given her as a deaconess.

There's an element of the universal church here. The church in Cenchrea was 700 miles from the church in Rome. And Paul is writing to a church that far apart and saying, “You need to receive the person I'm sending to you.” And if you read in verses 1 through 2, it says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints.”

I already mentioned to you that Phoebe was entrusted with a great responsibility here. She was entrusted with carrying Paul's letter to the Romans, which was a very important thing to do because there was no printing press, there were no copy machines. So, she had the only copy in existence. If she lost this book, it would be lost forever. You think about the amazing sovereignty of God that we have this many letters in the New Testament given to us today,

and how many of those letters could've gone down on a ship or been stolen or burned or whatever? There was no iCloud back then. What would life be like? There was no backup file for this. And as Donald Grey Barnhouse said, "Several movements in church history were created almost entirely from this book, like the Protestant Reformation." Where would Martin Luther be if it was not for the book of Romans? Or the Great Awakening? Where would John Wesley be without this book? Some of you came to faith in Christ by reading the book of Romans. Where would you be without this book? And it was given to you by the hands of this one individual lady. And now, Paul says, he tells the church in Rome to receive her in the Lord. The journey from Cenchrea to Rome was about a 700-mile trip. It would have taken a week or maybe much more depending on the weather. They would have had to travel across the Asia Minor, the country of Turkey by land over the Mediterranean Sea, into the what is now Italy and gone all the way northwest to the far corner of it where Rome was. She would have traveled on boats, traveled on camels, traveled in probably caravans, and she did it successfully. And as a result of that, Paul tells the Romans to receive her in a manner worthy of the saints.

It doesn't sound like a big deal, but to receive someone in Greek means to accept them or give them your trust. It doesn't just mean to pat them on the back and give them a potluck, although that's nice. The idea here is that, "You are to trust whatever she tells you with this document. You're receiving the document, you're receiving the messenger as well." Paul says, "Give her your trust like you would me."

This letter (like it was with all the letters in the New Testament) would have been read out loud to the people in Rome. A lot of people couldn't read in the first century, so when you got to a letter like this in the church, everybody would sit around in a circle and somebody would read it to you, and then they would explain it to you. They would walk you through what it says. And as they do that, Paul gets to the end of the letter here and he says, "Listen to Phoebe, receive her in a manner worthy of the saints." That means as one saint receives another or as one saint would receive another one, who is carrying such an important document.

And having said that, I mean in my mind, I'm trying to wrap my mind around what that looks like, and we don't have a lot of information here about that. The book of Romans doesn't tell us. We don't know what it would've looked like for Phoebe to give this letter to the Romans and how they would have treated her and what the interaction would have been like. The Bible is quiet on that.

But another passage that people go to to find some of that information is in the book of First Timothy. So, if you want to keep your finger in the book of Romans - Again, this is all in the context of talking about the office of deaconess - But another passage people go to, to talk about that office is in First Timothy 3:11, if you want to keep your finger in Romans and turn there. First Timothy 3:11 says this, it says, "Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things." Now, if you read the passage around that, you'll notice that Paul wrote this in the context of talking about elders and deacons. He put it right in between what he said about those other two offices, making it sound like he's referring to a third one here. Some think that this might refer to the deacons' wives, but that would be strange because he didn't talk about the elders' wives. And some think it might refer to women in general, but that would be odd as well because he'd already talked about the women of the church in chapter 2. So, the most obvious explanation, at least to my mind

anyway, is that this is referring to the office of deaconess. He's referring to the female deacons here.

You see the word “likewise” in verse 11? “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips.” That means “in a like manner” or “in the same way”. In the same way that the elders and deacons have these qualifications, so do the women or the deaconesses. In the same way the elders and deacons have these high standards, so does this office as well. And if that's the meaning here, then when we read verse 11, you can see that deaconesses do the same thing as deacons do. Their qualifications are similar, so the office would be similar. They have a lot of parallels between the two.

So, for instance, a couple of things that deaconesses have done in church history, they have taught other women in the church. They didn't teach the men. That wasn't allowed, but they taught the other women. And they taught the children as well. They disciplined the little ones, brought them up in the faith. They did vacation Bible school or that sort of thing. They were involved in mercy ministry, they visited the sick and the dying. As Clement of Alexandria said, “They evangelized, they helped the Word of God penetrate into the woman's quarters without scandal.”

One thing the deaconesses did that's pretty interesting at least at the time the New Testament was around, is they were involved in the ministry of adoption. When the Romans wouldn't want their babies, they couldn't abort them. The science wasn't invented yet. So, what they did was the Romans would just abandon their babies on the side of the road for the animals to eat or for slave owners to come and pick them up and put them into slavery. So, women of the church, a lot of the early deaconesses would come along and adopt them. They would take these babies that nobody wanted before the animals got them, and they would take them home and that's how the first orphanages started in human history.

And we can mention other things, but these are the type of things that this office would do. This is a female version of the deacons. There are no female elders because the elders teach the church and women are not allowed to do that. First Timothy 2:12 says, “I do not allow a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” So, that's not what they do. There are no female pastors either for the same reason. But to my knowledge, there's nothing preventing ladies from serving in an office like this, from being servants of the church.

Ian Maclaren, a Scottish pastor from the 1800s, tells a story of the time he was talking to a Scottish woman who said she felt like she had done nothing for the Lord. She felt like she failed Him. So, he asked her what she did with her time and she said, “Well, I cook and clean for my family.” So he said, “Well, tell me about them.” And so she said, “Well, two of my sons are on the mission field in China, and another son is on his way to Africa to tell them about Christ.” To which Ian Maclaren replied, “And you say you've done nothing for the Lord? You've sent three sons into the mission field. You've sent three evangelists to give the Gospel to the lost. My dear lady, you have done very, very well.” We all need someone to tell us that from time to time, right? We all need someone to encourage us and it seems like this historically, anyway, this is what the office of deaconess does. These are the ladies that encourage our women to keep on keeping on. In the case of Phoebe here, Paul says, “When you see someone doing that in a church, accept her into office.”

Which leads to a final point Paul makes about this. One more characteristic for a deaconess in the church. To just review the other ones, the first one is that she is commendable. Just like it

was with the deacons, the deaconess should be held in high esteem by the Church because she is commendable. She's a woman of high character. Second, she should be accepted as a deaconess or received in a manner worthy of the saints. Paul tells the Romans that because of Phoebe's excellent service, because she is so commendable, they should receive her and the letter that she brings, they should trust her.

Which brings us to a third characteristic Paul gives us, a third characteristic for a deaconess in the church and that is this, very simply, she's a helper. Going along with the passage here, Paul says that a deaconess is a helper. She helps people. Remember, that's what the word *diakanon* means. It means "servant" or "helper" because that's what she does. And if you read all the verses 1 through 2, Paul says, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever manner she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well." The word "helper" in verse 2 is – I was going to say a helpful word, but that's too many puns - It's an interesting word because it's rendered "patron, patroness" in some of your translations, or "provider". It refers to someone who helps more than just spiritually. They help financially. Phoebe gave people money. The early church had a number of wealthy people in it, a number of wealthy women who were married to rich Roman men and they were called patronesses or providers because they gave so much to the poor. Apparently, Phoebe was in this category. She gave more than just her word, she gave her wealth. She gave more than just sentiments, she gave money too because she was a helper.

Paul doesn't say this here, but Paul himself was not a rich man and so it could be that Phoebe paid for him and paid for the parchment this letter was written on. She paid for the ship and she paid for the men who traveled with her. We don't know that, but the money came from somewhere. It could be that she was the one who took care of all of this. And not only did she take care of it, but she traveled on board the ship as well. It would be very boring to sit on a ship just waiting for the hours to go by, just wondering, "When am I going to get there?" I took one of my sons to the airport the other day, every five minutes, "Are we there yet?" It would have been like that on board a ship. And yet she did this because that's what the office of deaconess is about. These people serve the church.

And we can look at other examples of this in the Bible, other examples of women who served like this. They didn't all have the title of servant or deaconess. In fact, if you look in Acts chapter 6, you don't have to turn there. But Acts chapter 6, when it mentions the first deacons...they're not called deacons either. The title's not put on them. But that's what they seem to be...Some of these ladies, it looks like that. You remember Lydia, the seller of purple? You guys remember her in the New Testament? Acts 16 says this about Lydia, the seller of purple: it says, "14 A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come in and stay at my house.'" That's a patroness, provider. She opened up her home to the apostles. What that passage doesn't say about Lydia, is that she was living in Macedonia at this time, which made her the first European convert in church history. Many of you come from European backgrounds. Your spiritual lineage started with her. She was the first European to be saved that we know of. And then she told her family about Christ, which made her the first European missionary. Kind of an interesting person in the Bible. She was the first European

to tell other Europeans about the Lord. It all started with her. But she was a helper in the Scripture as well. She was a patroness.

Then there was Priscilla, the wife of Aquila. She was another helper in the New Testament. You see the same type of mindset with her. Acts 18 says,

1 After these things he left Athens [Paul did] and went to Corinth. 2 And he found a Jew there named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded the Jews to leave Rome. 3 And because he was of the same trade, Paul stayed with them.

There you see another example of a patroness inviting someone into their home. As a matter of fact, Priscilla and Aquila would eventually end up in Rome. If you look in Romans 16:3, that couple eventually came to Rome. And in verse 3 of our passage, we're looking at, it says, "Greet Prisca [or that could be translated Priscilla] and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus." The interesting thing about that verse is that Priscilla's name is mentioned before her husband's. Another unusual thing to see in ancient writings. Her name is mentioned before his because she had a more prominent role to play in the church. And we could look at other examples of this. The Bible is full of them, of women who served as helpers.

Several years ago, John MacArthur wrote a book about this called "12 Extraordinary Women." He wrote a book called "12 Ordinary Men", and he followed that up with a book called "12 Extraordinary Women." And he explained why he called it that when he said this,

Many of the famous women we read about in the Bible were unremarkable in and of themselves. They were ordinary and they were common in some cases, shockingly low cast, just like the men. Take the Samaritan woman of John 4 for instance, we don't even know her name. Likewise, Anna was an obscure elderly widow. Rahab was a harlot. Even Mary, the mother of Christ was a young girl of no particular distinction. But in each instance what made them extraordinary was a memorable, life changing encounter with God.

In other words, all these women ultimately became extraordinary, not because of any natural qualities of their own, but because the God whom they worship refined them like silver. He redeemed them through the work of His Son, conformed them to His image. They therefore stand as reminders of both our fallenness and our potential.

And they remind us that we're all called to serve His glorious name. And the way this relates to our church is simple. I mean, the way this relates to our congregation is obvious. We want our women to do this. We want our ladies to learn from their example and serve His name too. Women, you have the opportunity just like men to stand on the shoulders of giants. You have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of Phoebe and Lydia and Priscilla and all these other ladies we just talked about.

And as we pursue this, I would like us to consider creating the office of deaconess in our church either now or in the future. I would like us to consider creating this position here. And I say "consider" this because there's different views on this and I understand that. Some of you come from churches where you didn't have this or churches where the office of deaconess did not exist. So, you may still be wrestling with this, you may have a different view, and I want to respect that. There's no rush on this. We're not on a timeline.

So, what I want us to do is this, the way this will work, over the next couple of months, we would like to hear your thoughts about this, if you would like to create the office of deaconess or not. The other elders and I would like to hear where you're at on this. We're not going to take a poll or anything like that. But just come tell us. Send us an email or give us a call.

And then if you're comfortable with that, we're going to follow our new Bylaws. The Bylaws allow us to create this office if we would like to do that. Section 7 in the new Bylaws says this,

The deaconesses shall consist of members possessing the qualifications described in First Timothy 3 and Titus 2, and shall be elected annually by a two thirds majority of the eligible votes cast by members present at a duly called congregational business meeting. The elders will compile and confirm the nominations and submit the names to the members for affirmation at the annual meeting.

So, that process is similar to that of the deacons. There's a twofold thing. We have a congregational meeting and then we affirm them at the annual or general meeting. But we don't have to do that. That doesn't mean this is mandatory. It's up to us as a congregation to decide which way to go. And so, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. If you would like this idea, we can look for women who meet these qualifications. Ladies who do all that's required of them in First Timothy 3 and Titus 2, and then follow the Bylaws to put them in position.

But let me say this, as we look at this office here, the important thing in this is that our ladies serve the Lord, amen? That's the important thing. The important thing, whether we have an office of deaconess or not, the important thing is that they help those in need, which you're already doing. You do a wonderful job of that. This office is just a way to organize that. This is just a way to encourage that along. But as we talk about that, we need to keep first things first. And the first thing for our church, the priority here is service. Charles Spurgeon said this, he said, "He who does not serve God where he is will not serve Him anywhere." So, the question is, "Are you serving God now? Are you serving Him where you are?" Robert Chapman said it this way (I really liked this quote), he said, "My job is to love people, to serve them and not to seek that they serve me."

Friends, did you come to church this morning with that in mind; that it's your job to come here to serve and not to seek that others serve you? I think you do. I've told you this before, our church is full of servants. You really get this. But as we create the position of deacon and think of some of these other things, my prayer is that this service would continue and my prayer is it will just spur us on to more love and good deeds. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we've talked about a lot of important things this morning or just things to consider. Father, as we dive into Your Word, we are trying to understand it more to apply to the life of our church that You would be glorified and honoured. Lord, thank you for the Scriptures that we do have a map to follow when planting a church. We do have Your guidelines to tell us what to do. And Lord, we just pray as we consider these things of deacons, deaconesses as we've already just recently instituted elders, Lord, that You would give us this heart of service that's so clearly demonstrated in the New Testament.

Lord, thank you for the example of women like Phoebe, and all these other ladies who just served and served and served and gave of themselves to You. Lord, I thank you that You've

given us so many ladies here that have the same mindset. Would you bless them, Lord, and would You make their tribe increase? Father, would our church grow in the area of service.

You served us, as we're going to celebrate here a moment at the Lord's Supper. You gave to us a gift that was absolutely unconditional. We don't deserve it, we have done nothing to earn it. And yet, You have given so freely to us through Christ. Help us, Lord, as we want to go out and give to others in response to that. May Christ be glorified at all we've considered this morning. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.