



Getting Back to Church

Lesson 5: Understanding 1 Timothy 3:11 - “Wives of Deacons”

Introduction

There are two offices that God has ordained in the church. They are the office of elder and the office of deacon. Throughout church history it has generally been understood what the role of the elder is and that only men can serve in that office. However, there has been much confusion regarding the office of deacon and the role that deacons play in the church. If the members of a church were asked, “What is a deacon?” the answer to that question would be diverse. This misunderstanding has led to great confusion not only about what a deacon does, but about who can serve in the office of deacon. While this lesson does not aim to explain the role of the deacon, it does seek to bring clarity regarding who can serve in the office of deacon.

There are four passages in 1 Timothy where Paul gives qualifications to specific groups of people. The four groups and passages are as follows:

Elders:

1 Timothy 3:1-7 (ESV): The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Deacons:

1 Timothy 3:8-10;12-13 (ESV): 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 . . . 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.

Deacon's Wives:

1 Timothy 3:11 (ESV): Their wives (*gunaikas*) likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

Widows:

1 Timothy 5:9-10 (ESV): ⁹ Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, ¹⁰ and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

The table below shows the qualifications Paul gives of the four different groups of people. Those groups of people are elders, deacons, deacon’s wives, and widows.

Elders (3:1-7)	Deacons (3:8-13)	Deacon’s Wives (3:11)	Widows (5:9-10)
Above reproach	Blameless		Reputation for good works
Husband of one wife	Husband of one wife		Wife of one husband
Sober-minded			
Self-controlled			
Respectable			
Hospitable			Shown hospitality
Able to teach	Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience		
Not a drunkard	Not addicted to much wine	Sober-minded	
Not violent			
Gentle			
Not quarrelsome			
Not a lover of money	Not greedy for dishonest gain		
One who manages his own household competently	Good manager of their children & households	Faithful in all things	Brought up children
Must not be a new convert			
Well thought of by outsiders			
	Dignified	Dignified	Over 60 years old
	Not double-tongued	Not malicious gossips	
	Be tested first		
			Washed the saint’s feet
			Cared for the afflicted
			Devoted herself to every good work

It is clearly understood that in First Timothy, Paul gives qualifications for elders and deacons. However, as seen in the table above, the elders and deacons are not the only ones who are given qualifications. Paul also gives qualifications for widows to be put on the list (1 Tim. 5:9–10). This shows that Paul gave qualifications to groups of people outside of the office of elder and deacon.

Regarding deacon’s wives, there are some pastors and scholars who consider deacon’s wives to be female deacons. This lesson will show biblically why the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:11 are not referring to females who serve in the office of deacon, but to the wives of the male deacons who serve in the office.

The Word “Deacon” As a Title Only for Males

In 1 Timothy 3:8–13, Paul uses the word “deacon” two times as a noun to refer to an official title of deacon (vv. 8 and 12). This word is used as an official title given to those who are selected to serve as assistants to the elders. These two times that Paul uses this official title, “deacon,” he clearly refers to men. How do we know? Below are three arguments proving that Paul is only referring to men when he uses the title “deacon.”

Argument #1: The Similarity of Qualifications

Paul gives five qualifications for male deacons in verses 8 and 9. He gives four qualifications for the *gunaikas* (“women/wives”) in verse 11 (see table above). The four listed for the women are similar to those given in verses 8 and 9 for deacons. This shows that Paul is addressing two different categories of people. In verses 8–10, Paul is clearly speaking to men because Paul would not repeat the same qualifications for the *gunaikas* if he was already addressing them in verses 8 and 9.

For example, let’s say someone made the statement, “Nurses (referring to male and female nurses) must attend four years of college and two years of nursing school. Female nurses must attend four years of college and two years of nursing school.” You would look at that statement and conclude that it was redundant to speak of female nurses in the second sentence since the female nurses were implied in the first sentence. Female nurses do not need to be addressed in the second sentence, unless only male nurses were implied in the first sentence. Paul repeats similar qualifications for *gunaikas* (“women/wives”) in verse 11 as he does for the deacons in verses 8 and 9, indicating that in verses 8 and 9, when Paul uses the title “deacons,” he is only addressing men.

Argument #2: The Husband of One Wife

In verse 12, when Paul uses the Greek word *diakonos*, he is referring to male deacons because he says of them that they must “be the husband of one wife.” Since a husband can only be a male, it clearly limits the word “deacon” in verse 12 to refer to males.

Argument #3: The Vague Term

If Paul is referring to women deacons in verse 11, then why does he not assign them a title, as he has previously done for both elders (1 Tim. 3:1) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8)? Why use an ambiguous word (*gunaikas*, “wives” or “women”) rather than a more specific designation like *diakonous* with the feminine article—whether *tas diakonous* (“female deacons”) or *gunaikas diakonous* (“women deacons”)?¹ As Tom Pennington states, “There’s a Greek word for deaconess, but it never appears in the New Testament. And the first use of the word deaconess in this sense, is in a third century document.”² The fact that Paul uses the vague term “*gunaikas*” in verse 11 shows that he never refers to women as *diakonos*. That title is only used when referring to men.

The above arguments show that the two instances where the title “deacon” is used (verses 8 and 12), they refer only to male deacons. Considering the two uses of the title “deacon” as referring to men, and the fact that nowhere in verses 8–12 does Paul refer to women as “deacons,” we can then conclude that “those who serve well as deacons” in verse 13 also refers to males. When Paul addresses women, he specifically addresses them with a different word, the word “*gunaikas*,” which can mean either “women or wives.”³ Therefore, whenever the title “deacon” is referred to in verses 8–13, we conclude that this title is only used to refer to men.

¹ Matt Smethurst, “Can Women Serve as Deacons? (Arguments For and Against), <https://www.crossway.org/articles/can-women-serve-as-deacons-arguments-for-and-against/>. Accessed October 31, 2025.

² Tom Pennington, “Who Matters to God: Romans 1:1-16,” preached April 25, 2021 at Countryside Bible Church, <https://countrysidebible.org/sermons/20210425a-107628>.

³ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*, ed. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000), 208.

The Word “Deacon” and its Non-Technical Use

Is the word “deacon” used in reference to a woman? There is one instance in all of Scripture where a woman is referred to as a *diakonos* (servant/deacon), but it is not used in the technical sense to refer to the office. In Romans 16:1, Paul says, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a **servant** of the church at Cenchreae.” The word *servant* in Greek is *diakonos*, which is where we get our word “deacon” from. While some claim that Paul was using this word in a technical sense to refer to an official title for Phoebe, the context and lexical evidence seem to state the opposite. For example, the NET Bible (2nd ed.) footnote on *servant* states:

It is debated whether δίακονος (*diakonos*) here refers to a specific office within the church. One contextual argument used to support this view is that Phoebe is associated with a particular church, Cenchrea, and as such would therefore be a deacon of that church. In the NT some who are called δίακονος are related to a particular church, yet the scholarly consensus is that such individuals are *not* deacons, but “servants” or “ministers” (other viable translations for δίακονος). For example, Epaphras is associated with the church in Colossians and is called a δίακονος in Colossians 1:7, but no contemporary translation regards him as a deacon. In 1 Timothy 4:6 Paul calls Timothy a δίακονος; Timothy was associated with the church in Ephesus, but he obviously was not a deacon. In addition, the lexical evidence leans away from this view: Within the NT, the διακον- word group rarely functions with a technical nuance. In any case, the evidence is not compelling either way. The view accepted in the translation above is that Phoebe was a servant of the church, not a deaconess, although this conclusion should be regarded as tentative.⁴

Although the scholars of the NET Bible regard their findings as tentative, based upon their evidence and many translations of the Bible, scholars conclude that Phoebe was a servant of the church, not serving in the office of deacon. For example, the majority of credible Bible translations translate *diakonos* as “servant” (ESV, KJV, NKJV, NASB, LSB, CSB, HCSB, and NET Bible).

Regarding *diakonos* in Romans 16:1, Paul Enns, in *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, states, “It appears Paul is using the term in a nontechnical sense, consistent with his informal greetings at the end of the letter (1 Cor. 16:15). Paul uses the term in a nontechnical way in other passages (Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 4:6).”⁵ Phoebe was a faithful servant in the church at Cenchrea, but she is not given the title “deacon” in Romans 16:1.

Regarding the Greek Word “*Gunaikas*”

The word *gunaikas* is used two other times in 1 Timothy 3. It is used in verse 2 and in verse 12. Both times the word *gunaikas* is translated as “wives” not “women.” Regarding the word “women” or “wives” in 1 Timothy 3:11, the NET Bible (2nd ed.) footnote states:

“The Greek word here is γυναῖκας (*gunaikas*) which literally means “women” or “wives.” It is possible that this refers to women who serve as deacons, “deaconesses.” The evidence is as follows: (1) The immediate context refers to deacons; (2) the author mentions nothing about wives in his section on elder qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1–7); (3) it would seem strange to have requirements placed on deacons’ wives without corresponding requirements placed on elders’ wives; and (4) elsewhere in the NT, there seems to be room for seeing women in this role (cf. Rom. 16:1).

⁴ The NET Bible, Second Edition, (Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C., 2017), n. “m”, 2157.

⁵ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody Publishers: Chicago, 2014), 372.

The translation “wives”—referring to the wives of the deacons—is probably to be preferred, though, for the following reasons: (1) It would be strange for the author to discuss women deacons right in the middle of the qualifications for male deacons; more naturally they would be addressed by themselves. (2) The author seems to indicate clearly in the next verse that women are not deacons: “Deacons must be husbands of one wife.” (3) Most of the qualifications given for deacons elsewhere do not appear here. Either the author has truncated the requirements for women deacons, or he is not actually referring to women deacons; the latter seems to be the more natural understanding. (4) The principle given in 1 Timothy 2:12 appears to be an overarching principle for church life which seems implicitly to limit the role of deacon to men. Nevertheless, a decision in this matter is difficult, and our conclusions must be regarded as tentative.

While the NET Bible scholars regard their conclusion as tentative, their findings are exegetically convincing considering the rest of Scripture. Nowhere in Scripture do we see women holding the office of deacon. The best translation for *gunaikas* is “wives” (ESV, KJV, NKJV, CSB, HCSB, and NET Bible).

Regarding the Qualifications for Deacon’s Wives

As already stated, in 1 Timothy 3:8–10 and 12, Paul is referring to male deacons. He lists nine qualifications that a male deacon must meet to serve in the office. However, when referring to the *gunaikas*, there are only four qualifications listed. Why would Paul truncate the qualifications for the women if they were serving in the same office as the men? For example, the qualifications for a male deacon in verse 10 states:

“And let them [male deacons] also be tested first; then let them [male deacons] serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”

This shows that a male deacon must first be tested and proven to be blameless before he is selected to serve in the office of deacon. However, if verse 11 refers to female deacons, why are they not required to be tested and to be blameless? Shouldn’t female deacons be tested and be blameless in order to serve in the office?

Paul also says the male deacon must “not be greedy for dishonest gain.” This is not a qualification given to the *gunaikas* in verse 11. If the women are to serve in the same office of deacon as men, why is there no qualification regarding greed for them?

There is another qualification that is clearly aimed at male deacons. Verse 12 says, “Let deacons each be the husband of one wife.” This is a qualification that can only be tested on a man who is being examined for the office of deacon. However, if verse 11 refers to female deacons, why don’t they have to be “the wife of one husband?” Being the wife of one husband is a clear qualification for a widow to be put on the list (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9), so why is it not a qualification given for the *gunaikas* if Paul is referring to female deacons? The lack of qualifications given to the *gunaikas* shows that Paul is not referring to female deacons, but to wives of the deacons.

As stated earlier, the qualifications for male deacons in verses 8 and 9 are very similar to the deacon’s wives of verse 11. Why is that? Because the wives of the deacons must have the same character qualifications as their husbands. Since the office of deacon constitutes the role of a servant in the church, a deacon may at times have his wife serving alongside him. Therefore, she needs to have the same character qualifications that her husband possesses as one who may serve alongside him in his ministry role as deacon.

Why are qualifications given for deacon's wives and not elder's wives? It seems the reason is because deacon's wives may serve alongside their husbands in the ministerial role their husbands hold. Tom Pennington states, "These qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:11 are for the wives of deacons, who from time to time, will assist their husbands in the service of the church."⁶ A deacon's wife (being a woman) is permitted to serve the church (Gal. 5:13) and at times may serve alongside her husband in the acts of caring for the church. Therefore, the wives of deacons must meet the qualifications Paul gives in verse 11. However, elder's wives do not serve alongside their husbands in the ministerial roles their husbands hold in the church. Wives of elders are not to lead, feed, and protect the flock like their husbands are called to do. Wives of elders are not permitted to teach or practice authority over a man (1 Tim. 2:12).

To be clear, this does not mean that the wives of elders can act in a manner contrary to what the deacon's wives have been called to. An elder's wife ought to reflect the woman Paul speaks of in Titus 2:3–5 and serve as an example for the other women in the church. The character of an elder's wife is a direct reflection of the kind of manager her husband is (1 Tim. 3:4) and whether her husband is qualified. Therefore, the character of both the elder's and deacon's wife ought to be taken into consideration when an elder or deacon is being tested (cf. 1 Tim. 3:10) to see if he is qualified for the office.

Considering 1 Timothy 2:12

The qualifications for elders and deacons are given within the larger context of the First Timothy. In 1 Timothy 2:12, Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." Paul then gives the explanation for this mandate in verse 13 where he says, "For Adam was formed first, then Eve." Paul grounds this mandate upon the creation order of man first, and then woman.

Alexander Strauch states, "As assistants of the elders and church officeholders, the deacons will exercise a measure of formal authority in the congregation, but always under the authority of elders."⁷ He also says, "Since both offices, eldership and deaconship, demand the exercise of authority that extends over the entire local church, an argument can be made that both offices are restricted to males."⁸ The fact that God does not allow women to teach or practice authority over men shows that the office of deacon is restricted to men.

The Prototype to Deacons

In the book of Acts, the church was founded on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). As the book of Acts continues, it traces the establishment of this newly founded church. While the early church did not have elders and deacons established, because the church was founded upon the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), many scholars believe that Acts 6:1–6 is a prototype of what was to come. Enns states, "It appears that the origin of the office [of deacon] began in Acts 6:1–6 where seven men were selected to care for the material needs of widows in the congregation."⁹

⁶ Tom Pennington, "Who Matters to God."

⁷ Alexander Strauch, *Paul's Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God's Church* (Lewis and Roth Publishers: Littleton, CO, 2017), 58.

⁸ Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church's Minister of Mercy* (Lewis & Roth Publishers: Littleton, CO, 1992), 118.

⁹ Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 371-372.

In Acts 6:1–6 the Twelve apostles selected seven men to serve (*diakoneō*; Acts 6:2) the female widows so the apostles could devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The Seven were given the task of serving tables so that both the Hellenistic and Hebrew Jewish widows would be served their daily portion of food.

While this would have been a perfect opportunity to select seven women to serve the female widows, this is not what the early church apostles did. The apostles gave the order for the congregation to select seven qualified *men*. These seven men were chosen to serve as close assistants to the apostles, and their ministry of service functioned as a complementary role to the apostles. In a similar manner, the male deacons of the church today are to be assistants to the elders who serve in a complementary role to the office of elder in the local church.

Church History

When looking at early church history, there is no evidence found that speaks of women deacons during the New Testament times. In the third century, a church order manual called *Didascalia Apostolorum* (“Teaching of the Apostles” c. A.D. 230), which represented the eastern church of the Roman Empire, contains the first identification of women deacons.¹⁰

In reference to Phoebe, who was a servant of the church at Cenchræa and was welcomed by the church at Rome, no early church fathers recognized her as holding the office of deacon (or deaconess) in Rome. Alexander Strauch states:

In the highly influential church order manual, *Apostolic Tradition* (ca. A.D. 215), which was written from Rome by Hippolytus, all the various offices of the church in Rome were listed. Hippolytus spoke of overseers, elders, deacons, subdeacons, confessors, widows, lectors, virgins, healers, but not of female deacons. In his seminal study on deaconesses, Aimé Georges Martimort comments:

The ecclesiology of St. Hippolytus of Rome simply excluded the possibility of deaconesses, as did the ecclesiology proclaimed by Tertullian all his life as well.

Cornelius (A.D. 251–53), Fabian’s successor in Rome as bishop/overseer, states in a letter that in Rome there were “forty-six presbyters, seven deacons, seven sub-deacons” and “above fifteen hundred widows and persons in distress, all of whom are supported by the grace and loving-kindness of the Master.” But there is no mention of deaconesses. If deaconesses existed in the first century in Rome, they quickly vanished from the pages of history. So, would the Christians in Rome have understood Paul to mean that Phoebe was a deacon? ¹¹ According to early church history, they did not.

¹⁰ Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon*, 119.

¹¹ Alexander Strauch, *Women, Women Deacons, Deaconesses, Helpers, or Wives* (<https://www.biblicaleldership.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Women-Deacons-or-Wives.pdf>, accessed July 1, 2026), 15.

A High View of Women

While God's word does not allow for women to serve in the office of elder or deacon, this does not mean women are less than or inferior to men. Women are to be highly esteemed for the roles that God has given them, and the evangelical church needs to do a better job of esteeming women. We can be certain that women in the early church served the church in tremendous ways and were used mightily for the edification of the body (Eph. 4:11–16). In Acts 9:36 we are told about Tabitha who was “abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did.” In 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul speaks of Timothy's mother and grandmother who were influential in teaching Timothy the Scriptures he had learned as a child (2 Tim. 3:15). In Acts 16, we are told about Lydia who was the first Christian in Europe and was used by God to serve Paul and his companions. There are many other examples in the New Testament of faithful women who served the church and were used by God for the edification of the church.

Just because God has given men and women specific roles does not mean one is superior to another. Both men and women have been created in the image of God and are spiritually equal. However, men and women have unique roles that God has given them for His glory. Just as the role of bearing children has been uniquely given to women (and a very important role at that), God has given unique roles to men as well.

In the church, God has given the role of the office of elder and deacon uniquely to men. However, not every man in the church will serve in the office of elder or deacon. That does not mean those men are inferior to the other men who do serve in an office. The same is true of women. Just because women are not given the role of holding the office of elder or deacon does not mean they are inferior to men. They have spiritual gifts that God has given them to be used for the edification of the church.

We ought to be grateful for the women who have been faithful to use their spiritual gifts for our edification and the edification of the church as a whole. We ought to pray that God would continue to raise up many more women to faithfully serve His church so that the church would continue to be strengthened and flourish this side of heaven.

Resources on Deacons and Women Serving the Church

- *You Go, Girl: How Women Build Up the Church* by Philip De Courcy
- *Minister of Mercy: The New Testament Deacon* by Alexander Strauch
- *Paul's Vision for the Deacons* by Alexander Strauch