

A Summons for Servants
Mark 10:35-45
September 30, 2007
FBC Waynesboro

Deacon Ordination

Let me introduce you to some deacons. Jesus is one. So are Paul and Timothy. The angels are called deacons so that those of you who are married to deacons can go home today and thank God that He sent you an angel. Barnabas is called a deacon and so are Erastus, Tychius, Onesimus, Onesiphorous, Epaphras, Apollos, along with Phoebe and Peter's mother-in-law. Add to this list the prophets who are called deacons, the women who ministered to Jesus, numerous unnamed companions of Paul and a host of recipients of the Book of Hebrews. The list goes on and on; those who are called deacons and are named and the host of unnamed men and women who are referred to as deacons.

The word that we translate "deacon" is found in three forms in the New Testament. In its verb form it points to the activity of those who carry this name. In its neutral noun form it points to the actions of those who carry this name. And in its personal noun form it points, of course, to the people who engage in the activities and actions that are characteristic of the term. The word itself in one of these three forms is found ninety-two times in the New Testament. Now here is the issue: **ONLY TWO OF THOSE TIMES DOES THE TERM REFER TO THE OFFICE OF THE DEACON.** It does in 1 Timothy 3 where twice we have a reference to the office and in Philippians 1 where Paul brings greetings to the elders and the deacons. The other ninety occur ences have no connection with the office because the focus is on the function that is found at the foundation of the term: diakonos, diakonia, diakonew. That only two of ninety-two occurrences of this term have anything to do with the office lead us to at least three conclusions that are very clear in the New Testament: first, the New Testament makes far less of the office than we do; second, what is most important is the function of those in the office and not its form and third, what is characteristic of the deacon is called for from every child of God who is committed to Jesus as Lord, otherwise ninety of ninety-two references in the New Testament are wasted.

An examination of the context and content of each place where some form

of the word “diakonos” is used makes clear that the central concern is service to Jesus as seen in service to those who belong to Jesus. For example, the Gospel of Matthew uses the term five times and three of them have to do with ministry to Jesus, one with the ministry of Jesus and the fifth found in Matthew 25 where our love for Jesus is seen in ministry to the least of those who belong to Him. The focus is that our service to Jesus is seen most plainly in our service to those who are struggling in their service to Jesus. Matthew 25 refers primarily to people whose service to Jesus is costly and those who love Jesus are called to come alongside and care for those whose service to Jesus is costly.

Paul communicates in 1 Corinthians 12 that there are a variety of ministries (diakoniai) but one Lord. God has gifted us in the body so that each of us has a way that we can serve. It is more than interesting to me that the New Testament makes only one ministry the mandate for all believers, and it is the one ministry from which all the others flow and apart from which the others have little or no meaning: We find this ministry in 2 Corinthians 5:18. Every believer is to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors of the Gospel of Jesus and it is this universal ministry that gives power and perspective to the particular ministries to which we are called in and through the body. Put simply, being a witness to and for Jesus as His representatives in the world is the foundational ministry for every child of God. But our practice of this ministry as the priority requires that we see ourselves as Jesus sees us, not as the world sees us nor as we want to be seen.

James and John came to Jesus with a question, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you?” The tone of the question anticipates an affirmative answer either because they think too highly of themselves or because they have misunderstood the teaching of Jesus about asking. The immediate and larger context would indicate more the former than the latter.

They had heard what Jesus taught about asking, but they did not think it applied to them. Matthew tells us that it was not James and John who asked, but their mother. The mother most likely would have been sister to Mary and James and John his cousins. There could be jealousy here; Jesus getting the main seat, at least let the cousins have the near seats. Or maybe these boys had just been taught by their mother that they were the greatest and they could be whatever they wanted to be and have whatever they set their minds to getting. Either way they are oblivious to the caution light flashing in their face in the form of the question that Jesus is asking, 36; they plow ahead, 37.

They want those seats that represent in a Kingdom the most important except for that of the King. Jesus flashes another light in their faces: some suggest that the cup represents internal suffering and the baptism external suffering and Jesus knows that these two will face enormous pain and suffering for the sake of the Gospel, but at this point they are after their place in history. They don't understand the Kingdom and have little or no knowledge of the King; they see the Kingdom as a place of pomp and power and the King as the one who will bring success and status to those around Him and they want first dibs from the King and His Kingdom. But so do the others and that is why they are so upset when they hear that James and John have jumped them to the question. One writer notes that while Jesus is teaching them about the cross, they are totally consumed by the crown. While He unfolds the way of the Word for those who are His, they are more interested in the way of the world. And here is the catch: they want everything the world offers in terms of significance and think that the way of the world is the only way to get it. Listen carefully now to what Jesus teaches us.

I want to focus on three words: significance, service, sacrifice. Jesus first makes it plain that greatness by the standards of the world is a sham and a show. Those who are in those places are pretenders. They are not real. They know nothing of true greatness, 42. Then He unfolds for us what must be clear to all who are His. He does not diminish the desire for greatness; Jesus does not slough off as sinners those who desire significance. This is striking. The word he uses for "great" has the connotation of exaltation and the word for first has the flavor of being the very finest of all. It is not a sin to desire greatness nor is it wrong to want to be the very best. The sin is in submitting ourselves to the wrong standards for the measurement of what "greatest" and "finest" mean.

Jesus says that significance in His Kingdom comes through service. And the service for which He calls takes us lower and lower, further and further away from our selves and what we want and more and more into commitment to and caring for others. Two words for servant are used in verse 43 with the last being a more radical form of servanthood than the first. The meaning is clear: we go higher in God's Kingdom by going lower; we gain by losing; significance is found in serving.

But there is one other thing and it is the key to everything. It is the word sacrifice. Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a

ransom for many. Paul says that He emptied Himself of all that was His by right. He is the eternal one who in His essence is God and at any point in His pilgrimage He could have seized that which was His by right. When He was in the wilderness assaulted by Satan. When being attacked by the religious leaders. While alone in Gethsemane. During the agony of the cross. But He didn't. He gave up His rights and gave Himself fully. And those who belong to Him understand that significance is found in service and service calls for sacrifice. When we sacrifice our wills and wants so that we can serve the needs of our brothers and sisters we find the true significance that God wants us to find. And even more it is in our serving that we find ourselves knowing Jesus at depth that we would not otherwise know Him.

I marvel every time I read the account of Jesus changing the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. There is a line in that account that holds the key to the whole event. After the wine had been brought out and the host of the feast is marveling over how it is the best, the text says that he who had such prominence and power, such greatness by the world's standards did not know where it came from, but the servants knew. It is such a great line because it reveals those who always know, not only Jesus but also that following Him through the sacrifice of our lives is the road to true and genuine significance.