

Be Strong and Courageous

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Introduction.

- A. As we've been announcing for the past several weeks, today we will appoint five men to serve as deacons. This is no trivial event, brethren, nor should any of us take it lightly. From today forward, for the first time since I came here, this congregation will finally be organized according to God's plan for the local church. I am firmly convinced that as we continue to honor the divine will in this way, it will have positive effects on this congregation that none of us have foreseen. This will be a new era for Margaret St.
- B. Of course, much of the responsibility for bringing this new era about will rest on the shoulders of our new deacons. If these men accept their new responsibilities and commit themselves wholly to serving the Lord and His church, the good they will do will be incalculable. If they do not, if they choose to be spectators rather than workers, or worse still, if they oppose the cause of Christ, the harm they will do will be equally far-reaching. This is precisely why only men of proven character may become deacons at all.
- C. This morning, then, my remarks will primarily address these five men. However, this subject still holds relevance and importance for all of us. All of us must support and encourage these men in their work, and for us to do so, we must understand it. Second, it may well be that we will be called on someday to serve as deacons or deacons' wives ourselves, and we need to prepare now for that future responsibility.
- D. All that we need to prepare fully, whether our time of service is immediate or indefinite, can be found within the pages of God's word. In the thousands of years of history that the Bible records, many men were called on to take up the leadership of God's people, just as these men are being called as leaders in this church today. We see such an occasion in the first chapter of the book of Joshua. Joshua himself is the one whom the Lord has chosen for greater responsibilities, and the principles that God enjoins upon him are equally significant to us today. More than that, though, our new deacons need to attend to God's message about the attitude they should have, which here is contained in the repeated phrase, "Be strong and courageous!"

I. Understand God's Purposes.

- A. Within this mindset, the first thing that our new deacons need to do is to understand God's purposes. We see God outlining these for Joshua in Joshua 1:1-4. God is quite clear about what He wants. He wants Joshua to lead the invasion of Canaan, to take the children of Israel across the Jordan, exterminate the inhabitants of the land, and claim their cities for God's people. This tends to be the sort of command we just read right through because we already know how things will turn out, but if we put ourselves in Joshua's sandals for a moment, we quickly see just how daunting this divine directive was. The Israelites may have had an army of half a million men or more, but the Canaanites were just as numerous. Worse still, the inhabitants of the land had the advantage of being on the defensive. Joshua had to lead his people across a river in flood, find food for all of them in a hostile countryside, and conquer cities whose walls he did not have the technology to break down. Even a man of Joshua's faith would have found this difficult. A lesser man would have found it impossible.
- B. Today, friends, the purpose awaiting our new deacons is both equally clear and equally daunting. The role of the deacon is to serve in the church, and for him to do that, his efforts must serve the purposes of the church. We forget it too often, but the purpose of this local church is not to carry forward the status quo. It is to get as many people to heaven as possible. When everyone who lives within driving distance of this building has obeyed the gospel and is living faithfully, we've fulfilled our purpose. Until then, we've got a lot of work to do.
- C. Everything the deacon does, whether it pursues this goal directly or indirectly, must be done with it in mind. The deacons who serve on the teaching committee must ask whether our classes are doing the best possible job of saving the lost and keeping the saved. The deacons who manage the resources of this congregation, whether those resources are physical, financial, or human, must see to it that those resources are being used for the glory of God as efficiently as possible. The variations are endless, but the theme is the same: it is not enough for the deacon to serve poorly or even adequately. He must serve admirably.
- D.

II. Accept God's Help.

- A. This standard for the work of a deacon is extremely high. One might even say that it is impossibly high. That's exactly why he must understand the next part of what God says to Joshua, which is that Joshua is to accept God's help. God brings this up in Joshua 1:5-6. God knows just how intimidating the task before His servant appears, so He brings up the one thing that will make it all possible: His presence in Joshua's life. He promises Joshua that just as He was with Moses, so now He will be with him. In just a few days, God will demonstrate this dramatically when He parts the Jordan for the Israelites just as He parted the Red Sea 40 years ago. God's help for Joshua makes his eventual success not only possible, but assured.

- B. In the same way, the deacon must trust in the presence of God. Friends, God hasn't gone off on vacation from the first century until the Second Coming. He's right here with us today, just as He has always been with His people. Whenever a deacon is trying to work for Him, whether that be in his work for the church, his work with his family, or his work spreading the gospel, all the help he needs is right there waiting for him.
- C. Of course, as much as God longs to help us, the final decision is ours. He will gladly supply us with all the spiritual aid we need, but we have to ask for it first. The Jordan only parted when the Levites carrying the ark demonstrated their faith by walking into the flood, and God only helps us when we demonstrate our faith through prayer. If a deacon wants to do the work that God expects, he must first become accustomed to constantly bringing his requests before the Father. Prayer is that rarest of things. It is a priceless resource that we can have as much of as we want. God doesn't get bored with listening to us. He doesn't get worn out. Indeed, the opposite is true. All of us, but especially those who are to be deacons, need to remember that the more we pray, the more we get out of prayer. Let's use it for God's work.

III. Obey God's Law.

- A. Even as the deacons take on these important responsibilities with God's help, they must also remember to obey God's law. This is God's final injunction to Joshua, and we read it in Joshua 1:7-8. One of the fascinating things about this text is the way that God emphasizes this point by repeating it in several different ways. God tells Joshua that he is to speak of the law, think about the law, be careful to do all of the law (twice), and not turn from the law. The law wasn't something that Joshua was to pay attention to haphazardly. Instead, he was supposed to devote himself to it, and only then would he and his people prosper and have success.
- B. The deacon of today needs to pay as much attention to God's law as God's leaders of 3500 years ago did. No amount of capacity in a man, no amount of ability, can condone or excuse his unrighteousness. A pattern of sin in the life of the deacon is unacceptable, both for his sake and for the sake of the entire church. His standing in the church gives him greater influence, and when he endangers his own soul, that influence can cause others to lose theirs as well.
- C. There is one particular temptation, though, that needs to be mentioned. Deacons are important in the body, yes, but they are not elders, and they must throttle the temptation to behave like elders or to criticize those who are. Just like everyone else in the church, the deacon operates under the oversight of the eldership, and if he cannot do that cheerfully, he needs to resign. Now, this is not to say that a deacon with knowledge of an elder's sin needs to remain silent. That's a subject that must be broached, privately at first and publicly if necessary. Nor is it even to say that the deacon cannot disagree with the elders in private, provided he does so in a respectful and godly fashion. However, any disagreements need to remain private. If this divine precept is not obeyed, the harm that backbiting and whispering do to the Lord's work can be enormous.
- D. As we consider the role of deacons in the church this morning, it seems appropriate to close with God's closing words to Joshua in Joshua 1:9. Be strong, be courageous, trust in God, and all will be well.

Conclusion. Deacons serve God in a special capacity, but all of us are to serve, whether we are leaders in the church or not. If you haven't been serving God as you should, now is the time to repent.