

## Outline

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## Service of Mercy

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## THE SERVICE OF MERCY

### Introduction

The Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons speaks of both "the ministry of mercy" and "the service of charity." The expression "the ministry of mercy" refers to the calling of the deacons, whereas "the service of charity" refers to the task of the congregation. This shows that deacons and congregation are both involved in the work of mercy, though each has his own task. With regard to the Deacons we speak of "ministry," since it involves those ordained to office. With regard to the members of the congregation we speak of "service." Combining the two expressions from the Form for Ordination, explains the title of this chapter: the service of mercy. In this chapter we will deal with the task of the deacons, and of the congregation towards those in need. In the chapter about the communion of saints we have dealt with some of the elements that will demand our attention in this part as well. Although the communion of saints includes more than the service of charity, there are several connections. The service of charity is especially concerned with the care for those who are suffering, who are "under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty."

### 1. Scripture

This part is divided in three sections. First we will deal with the mercy of God, then the mercy shown by the congregation, and thirdly the mercy shown by the office-bearers, in this case, the deacons.

#### 1.1. Mercy of God

The LORD God reveals Himself in word and deed as the God of mercy.

Ex. 34 : 6

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness

Mercy is the feeling of compassion for the other who is in need or help. In the context of the covenant it is the LORD's compassion for sinners. It is often connected to His steadfast love and faithfulness. This shows that this mercy is not based on anything God's people have done, but is founded in the LORD's faithfulness to His word. The LORD's dealings with Israel are a powerful demonstration and proof of His mercy.

Ps. 103: 6 - 8

The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

The ultimate proof of this mercy is the coming of the Son of God.

Luke 1 : 68, 72

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. ... to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant.

Not only was the Lord Jesus Himself the proof of God's mercy, He also showed the mercy of God in how He dealt with God's people.

Mat. 11:4-5

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: [5] The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy\* are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Mat.20:28

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Mark 8:2-3

"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. [3] If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

Titus 3:4-5

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.

#### 1.2. The Service of Mercy

Already under the Old Testament the LORD commanded His people to show mercy to the needy. Because He is the God of mercy, He wants His people to be merciful.

Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

To teach His people this service of mercy the LORD gave several laws to take care of and protect the needy, the fatherless and widows.

Deut.15:4

However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you,

Deut.15:11

There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.

Lev.19:9-10

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Lev.23:22

"When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God."

Leviticus 25:35-37

"If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you. [36] Do not take interest of any kind\* from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. [37] You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.

Deut.24:10-13

When you make a loan of any kind to your neighbor, do not go into his house to get what he is offering as a pledge. Stay outside and let the man to whom you are making the loan bring the pledge out to you. If the man is poor, do not go to sleep with his pledge in your possession. Return his cloak to him by sunset so that he may sleep in it. Then he will thank you, and it will be regarded as a righteous act in the sight of the LORD your God.

Deut.24:15

Pay him his wages each day before sunset, because he is poor and is counting on it. Otherwise he may cry to the LORD against you, and you will be guilty of sin.

One of the reasons for God's punishment during the time of the prophets is their refusal to take care of the needy.

Isa. 1:23

Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them

Isa.10:2

to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless.

The Lord Jesus reminded God's people of this call.

Mat. 9:13

But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.\* For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'

Mat. 23:23

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Mark 10:43-44

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

John 13:15

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you

He showed the importance of this service of mercy with the parable about the sheep and the goats.

Matthew 25:40

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

The apostles continued this instruction of the Lord Jesus, calling the church to show mercy. They also gave the example, e.g. in the collection for the needy in Judea.

Rom.12:8

if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

2 Cor.8:14-15

At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality, as it is written: "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little."

Gal.5:13

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature\*; rather, serve one another in love.

Gal. 6 : 10

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Heb. 13:16

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

1 Tim.6:18-19

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

James 2:13

because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

1 John 3:16-18

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

### 1.3. The Ministry of Mercy

"For the sake of this service of love, Christ has given deacons to His church. When the apostles realized that they would have to give up preaching the Word of God if they had to devote their full attention to the daily support of the needy, they assigned this duty to seven brothers chosen by the congregation." (Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons) The task of these seven brothers was not identical to the task of the deacons today, but the task of the deacons finds its beginning in the work of these seven brothers.

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food

The apostle Paul gave instruction concerning the task of the deacons.

1 Tim. 3:8-10

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

It seems that also the services of others, especially widows, were used for this service of mercy.

1 Tim.5:9

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband,

Finally, the apostles gave leadership in the collection for needy brotherhood in Judea.

Acts 11:29

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

Rom.15:25-26

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.

Rom.15:31

Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there,

2 Cor.9:1

There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the saints.

2 Cor.9:12-13

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

## 2. Confession/Church Order/Liturgical Forms

### 2.1. Belgic Confession

In the Belgic Confession the care for the needy is mentioned in connection with the communion of saints and the task of the office-bearers

Art. 28

They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline and bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

Art. 30

and also that the poor and all afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need.

### 2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism points out the task to show mercy in connection with the communion of saints and the 4th, 6th and 8th commandment

Q. 55

What do you understand by *the communion of the saints*?

A.

First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.

Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.

A. 103

that I diligently attend the church of God, ... to give Christian offerings for the poor.

A. 107

God commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy and friendliness toward him, to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.

Q. 111

What does God require of you in this commandment?

A.

I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.

### 2.3. Church Order

Art. 23 The Office of Deacon

The specific duties of the office of deacon are: to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and to exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; further, to gather and manage the offerings and to distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. they shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

### 2.4. Liturgical Forms

Form for Public Profession of Faith

Fourth, do you firmly resolve to commit your whole life to the Lord's service as a living member of His Church?

Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper

By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says, *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* As one bread is baked out of many grains and one wine is pressed out of many grapes, so we all, incorporated in Christ by faith, are together one body. For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds.

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

The whole section that explains the Ministry of Mercy.

Charge:

You deacons, be faithful and diligent in the gathering of gifts and distribute them cheerfully to those who need assistance, especially to the widows and orphans. Do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith. Support those who are burdened with cares or who are lonely. Give in your ministry of mercy a good example to the congregation of the service to which all are called by Christ Jesus.

Form for the Solemnization of Marriage

Work faithfully in your daily calling, that you may support your family and also help those in need.

## 2.5. Prayers

### Prayer 2. A Prayer for all the needs of Christendom

We remember before Thee all those whom Thou art chastening with poverty, imprisonment, physical illness, or spiritual distress. may it please Thee to heal the sick and to restore soundness of mind to the mentally ill.

Surround those who are handicapped in body or mind with thy care and bless all that is done to help them. Lift up those who are cast down. Be a Comforter to the widowers, a Protector to the widows, a Father to the orphans. Show thy love to the lonely, Thy strength to the weak, Thy grace to the dying, Thy sustaining power to the bereaved. Grant that all trials may yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Glorify Thyself in the faith, love, and endurance of all those whom Thou hast called to Thy eternal glory in Christ.

### Prayer 9 and 10. Prayer for the Sick and the Spiritually Distressed.

#### Prayer 11, A Morning prayer

Comfort the distressed and show thy mercy and help to all who call upon Thy holy Name in sickness and other trials of life.

#### Prayer 12 An Evening Prayer

Bestow comfort and rest upon all that are ill, bowed down with grief, or afflicted with spiritual distress. Thy steadfast love endures for ever. Do not forsake the works of thy hands.

### Prayer 15 An Opening Prayer for the Meeting of the Deacons.

## 3. Goal and Purpose

The Lord calls us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty. This determines then also the task of the deacons. It is their responsibility to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church. The goal in all this is that in this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men.

## 4. History

We learn from Acts that in the church right after Pentecost there was a genuine care for each other. At the same time we also read in the letters of the apostles several admonitions to show mercy for each other, which indicates that this care was not always practised the way it should have been. The subsequent history of the church shows that the service of mercy had its ups and downs. In general one can say that as deformation set in, this was also seen in the service of mercy. The opposite is true as well, when the Lord gave reformation the service of mercy changed for the better.

In the Middle Ages things change. We see the emergence of hierarchy. The bishop took all the power to himself. Many of the other offices became superfluous. The deacon was kept in name, but he was no more than a helper of the bishop. At the same time the doctrine of salvation by good works placed the service of mercy in a meritorious context. Showing mercy was a means to earn salvation. With the Reformation both elements changed. The deacon received his office back. The Reformed churches made sure that in the Church Order his office was properly spelled out. In addition, the service of mercy was placed in the context of God's mercy in Christ for us. You see this e.g. in the connection between the work of the deacons and the Lord's Supper. The service of mercy is the service of thankfulness.

The Articles of Wesel of 1568 give evidence of the Reformed approach

### Chapter V - Of the Deacons

[1.] It is completely certain from the testimony of Scripture that the office of deacon is that they serve the tables, that is, they come to the help of the poor in their needs and provide them with what is necessary by gathering the alms.

[5.] It would be beneficial when especially in the larger congregations, two kinds of deacons are appointed. The first will apply themselves to the gathering and distribution of the alms and take care at the same time, that if any goods are bequeathed to the poor, these will be requisitioned in a legal manner and faithfully will be distributed to the beneficiaries. [6.] The other part will mainly take care of the sick, wounded and those in prison. Besides the gift of faithfulness and zeal, these [deacons] should be endowed also with the gift of comforting and with more than a general knowledge of Scripture. They will diligently ask the elders whether there are sick and weak in their wards who need comfort and uplifting.

In the 19th century the service of mercy was attacked from another side. The government took it upon itself to do this work. The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the industrial revolution. Many people moved to the cities, and ended up living in appalling circumstances. Add to this the increasing secularization and the stage is set for the government to take care of the social welfare of the nation. It must be said that many Christians who were concerned about the poverty and secularization set up charitable organizations. These organization did a lot of good work. This does not do away with the sad reality that the church did not always see her task. In the Netherlands this changed with the Secession of 1834 and the Doleantie of 1886. Again it was seen as the task of the church to take care of the needy. Men like Prof.L.Lindeboom and Dr.A.Kuyper worked hard to make the churches once again aware of its calling.

### **5. Today**

In order to stimulate the service of mercy in our situation we have to have a good understanding of the world in which we live, and the needs we meet. Our society is characterized by prosperity and social safety. The government promises to take care of us from cradle to grave. Even if we are in the midst of cut backs, this philosophy remains the same. At the same time we note that we live in a society which, to use the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24:12, is increasingly growing cold. The words of 2 Tim.3 : 2-5 apply to our society. Men will become lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive etc.

Living in such a world has influence on us and we do well to note what is happening in society around us. To mention some elements. Our world is characterized by mobility, hurry and speed. People move easily, and communication breaks down boundaries. The result is that personal relationships become shallow. We also witness a terrible selfishness. It seems that the idol worship of the past now culminates in the worship of "self". Much entertainment, for example, is oriented on "self." We are told not to judge others, in order words, to leave each other alone. The result is loneliness. Indeed this is where the worship of "self" ends up: utter loneliness. Our society is also adversely effected by the prosperity we have. Materialism has a hay day. People live for bread and games. Another element that we should not overlook is the change in work environment. With the coming of the computer technology the work place has changed. It is no longer so that once you know a trade you can keep it for the rest of your life. The skill and experience of older people are of no value anymore. In fact it becomes increasingly difficult for older members of society to find work. Last but not least, we witness the breakdown of the family unit. This is partly because of the teachings of feminism. The fact that so many mothers go out to work has also contributed to the break down of the family. Another reason is the push to legalize so-called alternative ways of living together. The family is no longer the place where the next generation is prepared for the task ahead.

All these things influence us as well, and has consequences for the service of mercy. On the one hand we can say that this service is so necessary in a world which is growing cold. On the other hand, we witness also among us the results of individualism, materialism and changes in the family. Government social assistance programs can form a direct attack on the communion of saints. In helping the members to show mercy we must also open their eyes for these things. We have ask the members whether they see the need of others and understand what they can do to show care for the other members. We have to stress that we have to come to know each other, and must be willing to be known by others. We have to speak about the (false) claim of the state to give security. We have to discuss whether and how we use government programs and why it is that people rather go to Social Services than to the deacons.

### **6. Calling of Congregation**

The Lord calls us to show hospitality, generosity, and mercy, so that the weak and needy may share abundantly in the joy of God's people. No one in the congregation may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty (Form for Ordination). The charge to the congregation is: Take care that the deacons have sufficient means to fulfil their ministry. be good stewards of all that the Lord has entrusted to you. Remember Christ, your example in serving the church of God.

The Form speaks about showing hospitality, generosity and mercy, so that those who are in need and are suffering may share in the joy of our redemption in Christ. The focus of this calling is in the first place with regard to the brothers and sisters in the church. It is not easy to assess how this functions in the congregation. Do the members show hospitality to those who are needy? Is there generosity toward those who are in need? Does the service of mercy continue in this congregation? It is not easy to answer these questions because so much is done that is not necessarily noticed by others. This is good, because the service of mercy is not done to impress others, but to show the love of Christ. Yet, it can happen that we come across a situation where this service of mercy is not functioning as it should. It can happen that lonely members complain about the lack of company, or that there are those who have a hard time to make ends meet feel that what is given is not given cheerfully. It will be good to address this calling of the congregation on visits. The visits by the elders and deacons as well as the preaching and catechism teaching have to give help and direction in this regard. We should not hesitate to give the example ourselves. At times it can be necessary to organize means in which we can serve one another. The services and talents of others in the congregation can be employed in this way. The Deacons can stimulate this work. M.Assink gives a helpful chart in this regard, which is added to this chapter.

The members of the church also have an obligation in view of the need in this world. Scripture teaches us to do good to all men. This can involve donations for charitable causes, giving to local food drives or disaster relief. The Deacons can stimulate this as well.

### 7. The Lord's Supper

Both the Form for Ordination and the Church Order say that the Deacons shall promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord. In this way God's children will increase in love to one another and to all men. The table that signs and seals God's mercy is the basis for the service of mercy in the congregation. We have communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit. But by "the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body." "For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one other, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds. Both elders and deacons can appeal to the celebration of the Lord's Supper in encouraging the congregation in the service of mercy.

### 8. Evaluation

1. There are several organized ways in which those who are in need can be taken care of. How do we involve the services and talents of the members? Are the Deacons involved in this?
2. Each congregation has its own composition. Are there members who need special attention, e.g. elderly, handicapped, lonely? How is this functioning?
3. How can we better understand the needs which members face?
4. How can we help the members to grow in love to one another and to all men?
5. Is there an awareness of the need in our society/world? How can we stimulate this?
6. Are there matters which you want to bring to the attention of the meeting? Why? What can we do about them?

### 12. Literature

- P.Y.DeJong, The Ministry of Mercy For Today, reprinted in Diakonia, I,2 - IV,3  
 C.VanDam, The Diaconal Task, some old testament roots and their continuing significance, in Diakonia, II,2  
 B.Nederveen, The Task of the Deacons for Today, in Diakonia, V,1  
 A.N.Hendriks, The Congregation and her Diaconate, in Diakonia, IV, 2  
 M.Assink, Diaconate with Perspective, Diakonia, VIII,2-XI,1



NEED		HELP	
Circumstances	Possible results	Deacons	Congregation
Chronic illness	house-bound becoming lonely	comfort draw up a visiting roster	regular visits domestic help
Old age	decreased mobility fewer contacts illnesses becoming lonely	comfort being alert to hidden needs investigate vacation prospects	doing chores/errands showing concern being a ready listener
House-bound	becoming lonely fewer contacts	visiting roster investigate vacation prospects	regular attention doing the shopping
Unfit for work	diminishing contacts feeling worthless financial problems	making contacts investigate work alternatives financial support	involvement showing concern
Unemployed	feeling useless fewer contacts disruption of family relations	sympathy & empathy sensitive to money problems encourage self- employment	showing concern direct involvement
Physically Handicapped	impaired mobility diminishing contacts	scheduling of transportation doing chores/errands recording worship services	showing concern
Financial problems	hidden poverty increasing debts	helping to budget financial support	invite the children birthday extras
Living alone	feeling lonely being lonesome	giving comfort inform congregation	making contacts (e.g. by way of hobbies) giving attention (e.g. prepared meals)

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