

"THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS"

1 Timothy 3:14-16

Intro: The word that Paul used here in verse 16, translated "godliness," is used more in 1 Timothy than all of the other NT books where it is found combined: 8 here; 7 elsewhere. The references in 1 Timothy are 2:2, 10; 3:16; 4:7, 8; 6:3, 5, 6, 11. It is found once in Acts (3:12), once in 2 Timothy (3:5), once in Titus (1:1), and four times in 2 Peter (1:3, 6, 7; 3:11).

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul did not use this word until he got to the Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

It is a word which means to be well-devoted to God. To be a godly person one must be primarily concerned about pleasing God in his or her life. This is a word which suggests worshipping, with the added thought that the worshiper will become like the person he worships. This is the great passion of his heart. A godly person is one who is devoted to God. He fears God. And he longs to be like God in his own soul and life. The word that is often used to translate this word is piety, which points to a person who is devoted to God, not just outwardly, but in heart, and not just out in the world, but with each other as well. It is the opposite of being profane or secular, the opposite of living according to the world's standards. Paul was speaking of this difference in verse 8 of Colossians 2 when he said, "Beware lest any man spoil you..."

But this is not only the desire of those who are truly the Lord's people, but, what is even more important, this is the desire of God for His people. That fact is clear throughout the Word of God, not only in the NT, but in the OT as well.

The word probably did not need the long explanation in Paul's day that I have given to you. But its importance is seen in the way Paul has used it in the Pastoral Epistles. And we would have to conclude that this is the main goal of the work of the church man-ward! This was to be Timothy's ministry even after Paul was gone. And that goal or purpose has been handed down to every pastor from that day to this who has been called of God to the work of the ministry. So it is a key word in the work of the church. Or, to state it another way, this is a key word in pastoral theology.

Paul had written about a number of things by the time he got to what is the end of chapter 3 in our Bibles, but you can see from his words in those last three verses of chapter 3 that this was a main point in his Epistle. And when we look at the fifteenth verse, we can see that being godly requires

knowing how to "behave" ourselves "in the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

So while godliness is founded upon doctrine, it issues into live, into our behavior. And what is the house of God? We are! It is not some ornate building, nor even a school building that is used for church services. Whether a building be elaborate, or very plain, building are not "the house of God." Instead I remind you of two verses we had in the Epistle to the Ephesians, Eph. 2:20-22. Paul, referring to believers said,

And are built upon the foundation
of the apostles and prophets,
Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.
In whom all the building fitly framed together
groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:
In whom ye also are builded together
for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

So, if you want to know where God dwells today, He dwells in and with His people. That is what makes the gathering of the Lord's people such a unique event.

We are a part of that greater body of Christ, and it is through us, in part, that God is pleased to make Himself known in our day. I say, "in part," because He uses His Word, He uses creation, He uses the consciences of men, He providentially uses the events of history, BUT HE ALSO USES US!

Now when you see that we are "the pillar and ground of the truth," and that "godliness" is our objective, this brings before us a very important Biblical truth. As "the pillar" of the truth we support it, we proclaim it, we stand for it. As the "ground of the truth" we are fixed, settled, stationary with regard to the truth. We are not "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:14), but year after year, generation after generation, the church stands firmly for the truths of Scripture.

Now we do that by our preaching and teaching. There is no question about that. Nothing should be taught from this pulpit, nor in any of our classes, but that which comes directly from the Bible, the Word of God. We believe in the great fundamentals of the faith, and we intend to continue believing in them. We support the truth by our preaching and teaching--whether from the pulpit, or in personal conversation.

But that alone is not enough.

We are to support the truth and proclaim the truth by the

"godliness" of our lives! The church that only preaches will become stern and rigid and unloving. The church that concentrates only on the practical, becomes flabby and weak--and sooner or later will become extinct. We need solid preaching and godly living. With that combination we will have the blessing of God.

But now let us go to verse 16, and our subject, "the mystery of godliness." Paul wrote that "GREAT is the MYSTERY of godliness." What did he mean that it is a "great...mystery"?

A "mystery" in the NT is not something that is impossible to understand, nor even difficult to understand, i.e., something that has to be figured out. No, there are many passages which tell us that a NT mystery is a secret which God has kept, but now has revealed IN HIS WORD, FOR ALL OF HIS PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND.

Let me be perfectly clear on this point. God has always wanted His people to be a godly people. That was His desire for Adam, for Noah, for Abraham, and right on down the line. He has never had a lower standard than that for any of His people. BUT--THE FULL TRUTH CONCERNING GODLINESS, AND HOW IT IS TO BE ATTAINED, WAS NOT, AND COULD NOT HAVE BEEN, REVEALED UNTIL CHRIST CAME, AND SUFFERED, DIED, AND ROSE AGAIN.

"Godliness" carried to perfection is what we all we be when we are "with the Lord." PERFECT GODLINESS IS ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION. AND ENTIRE SANCTIFICATION IS GLORIFICATION. None of us will be that godly until we get to heaven, but day by day we are to be moving in that direction HERE AND NOW!

How is it possible, being people like we are, living in a world like this, to be GODLY?

The sixteenth verse gives us our answer. Here "the mystery of godliness" is fully made known. This is the secret fully told. None of us should have any trouble understanding what it is, and how it is attained, if we understand verse 16.

Now I want to ask you a question. Here it is: WHO WAS PAUL TALKING ABOUT IN VERSE SIXTEEN? (Repeat the phrases of the verse.)

I think that all of us should be able to answer that question. Paul was talking about Jesus Christ. He was saying that to know Jesus Christ is to know what godliness is, and how it is possible.

Will you notice also that these six phrases in verse sixteen carry us all of the way from the birth of Christ (which we remember tomorrow) to the ascension of Christ when He went back to heaven to be with the Father?

That is why I am dealing with this text today on Christmas Sunday. It was in the birth of Christ, and throughout the work of Christ here on earth, that the complete secret of "godliness" was finally and fully revealed.

Let us quickly look at each one of these statements to see how each is related to "godliness."

- 1) "God was manifest in the flesh.
- 2) "Justified in the Spirit.
- 3) "Seen of angels.
- 4) "Preached unto the Gentiles.
- 5) "Believed on in the world.
- 6) "Received up into glory."

It is all called "great," not only because each part refers to Christ, but because of the tremendous importance of what our Lord was doing when He was here on earth. He was not only saving sinners, but He was making saints.

What did it take?

I. "GOD WAS MANIFEST IN THE FLESH."

Our best MSS say, "He who was manifest in the flesh." But that does not change the meaning. When Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, "God was manifest in the flesh." He came in human flesh because He came in behalf of those who were mere human beings.

We do not speak of a birth today in this way, do we? We do not say that little Kimberly Marie Knight "was manifest in the flesh." Why do we not say it that way? Because when little Kimberly was conceived, her existence as a person began. In the case of our Lord Jesus Christ, His conception was by the Holy Spirit, and in ways which we are not told, and probably could not understand if we were told, the eternal Son of God took His place in the womb of Mary, and after the usual time was born as the baby Jesus.

But Paul could not have spoken of the birth of Jesus in this way if Jesus Christ were not Deity when He was conceived by the Spirit, and when He was born. In the words of the Apostle John, it was "the Word" who "was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

But let us go on.

II. "JUSTIFIED IN THE SPIRIT."

I have just mentioned that our Lord was God "manifest in the flesh." Why would Paul say that he was "justified in

the Spirit" when He did not need to be justified?

I think that we can answer that question for ourselves when we remember that to justify is TO DECLARE RIGHTEOUS! So for our Lord to be justified by the Spirit meant that He was declared by the Spirit of God to be righteous at some time, or at some times, while our Lord was here on earth. When would that have been?

I will name two occasions when that took place:

- 1) At our Lord's temptation by Satan. Cf. Luke 4:1, 2a.
- 2) At our Lord's resurrection. Cf. 1 Pet. 3:18.

What was the Spirit doing? He was declaring the perfect "godliness" of the Son of God.

But notice the third phrase.

III. "SEEN OF ANGELS."

What could this possibly mean? Of course, He was seen of angels. Angels have seen Him from the time of their creation. And they were active in His ministry while He was here on earth.

Personally I believe that Paul was speaking here primarily about the resurrection of Christ. No man, none of the disciples, saw the resurrection. BUT ANGELS DID! And they were there at the tomb waiting for the women when they came to find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it was angels who first proclaimed that marvelous message of Christ's resurrection.

Do you remember that list of people in 1 Cor. 15 who saw the Lord after He was raised from the dead? Angels were not mentioned there, but they were first! Cf. John 20:12. They were two angels who appeared as men.

But we must hurry on.

IV. "PREACHED UNTO THE GENTILES."

This and the next statement are related, but there is a difference.

Who told them to carry this message to the Gentiles? Our Lord did. Cf. Matt. 28:18-20. Therefore, this statement gives an indication of the will of God. The Gospel and the life of godliness which it produces was not just for the Jew, but for the Gentile as well.

And this is followed with

V. "BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD."

Two of the amazing things about the ministry of the Word in the first century were its rejection by the Jews and its acceptance by the Gentiles--truly a work of God.

And then we come to the last phrase, and the last point:

VI. "RECEIVED UP INTO GLORY."

This means that the Lord was welcomed back into heaven. His work was finished, and finished to the complete satisfaction of the Father. The Son of God had left nothing undone, nothing that needed to be added. His work was perfect.

Concl: What are we to learn from all of this?

First, and most obviously, we learn that there can be not godliness without Jesus Christ. No one can please God, can be truly devoted to God apart from Christ. As we have learned in Colossians, our "hope of glory" is "Christ in you."

Secondly, we have in these verses the way of holiness that has the full approval of the Triune God: the Son did the work, the Holy Spirit confirmed it, and the Father accepted it.

Thirdly, by the will of God it is a way of godliness for all people, Jews and Gentiles. And the assurance of that is to be seen in the fact that both Jews and Gentiles were ministered to while our Lord was here on earth, and there were both Jews and Gentiles who trusted in Christ.

Fourthly, and lastly, this life is ours by faith. The Lord was "believed on in the world." The work of our Lord was effective, and from that day until this, and even before that day, people have believed in Christ as evidence of the work of grace that God has done in their hearts.

Lo! th' incarnate God, ascended,
Pleads the mercy of His blood;
Venture on him, venture wholly,
Let no other trust intrude:
None but Jesus, none but Jesus,
None but Jesus can do helpless sinners good.