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1 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Ninth Message

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# THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

*SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH*

In our studies in the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy, Paul now turns his attention from the qualifications for those in church leadership, i.e. elders and deacons, to the conduct required of all within church, what he terms "the mystery of godliness." The apostle is eager to return to Ephesus so that he might implement the corrective measures that the church so desperately needed. But he senses that he will be delayed; therefore he writes these instructions for Timothy. His purpose is that the church will know explicitly "how" they "ought to conduct themselves in God's household." "Household" (*oikos* – "house," "household," "family") is an important term for Paul. Everything about the pursuit of godliness should make us more relational, more human, and thus more like a family. Christians should not be austere, gloomy, rigid or isolated eccentrics who are uncomfortable to be around. Rather, they should be attractive, robust, vital human beings, people who are adept at handling all kinds of relationships, from wailing infants to frail widows.

The value of these instructions is that they are extremely practical. Knight calls it "how to" knowledge that "aptly covers the conduct expected from, and the mutual relationships of, all the groups discussed."<sup>1</sup> They not only set forth the standards for right relationships that make the church a healthy family, they also reveal the "way" we become godly. This is what makes the mystery so "great" in Paul's mind. In the New Testament, a "mystery" is not something known only to a select few, but rather a divine truth that has now come to light in the glory of the gospel and therefore accessible to all who believe. Therefore when Paul says, "Great is the mystery of godliness," he holds it up as a sublime truth to be treasured by all.

So what then is this secret to becoming godly? What is it that truly motivates us? And once motivated, how are we actually transformed? How does theological truth get from our head to our heart, and finally to our hands and feet? What environments are most conducive to cultivating godliness? These vital questions determine where we choose to live, how we educate our children, how long we remain in a particular job, and "how" we "do church."

Paul identifies three aspects of the "mystery of godliness" which will help us understand our identity as the people of God, our focus as worshippers of Christ, and a realistic appraisal of the devil's activity, which God uses to brand godliness into the bone and marrow of our being.

## I. Our Identity (1 Tim 3:14-16a)

**Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great... (1 Tim 3:14-16a TNIV)**

### A. In relation to God

Godliness is not something we can manufacture from within; rather, it comes from an encounter with the living God who humbles himself to descend into our world and initiates a relationship with us. The first time we discover this expression, "house of God," surprisingly it is not found among pious worshippers seeking God at some holy site. No, it

is when the conniving Jacob had just stolen his brother's birthright and was fleeing for his life. After his escape he arrived at a "certain place," where he spent the night. At a time when Jacob's life was dark and the world silent, God made himself known to him in a dream. In the dream, Jacob saw three marvelous things, each of which is introduced by the word "behold" or "see." First, he beheld a stairway, firmly planted on the earth. Gazing upward, he saw that its height reached heaven's gate. The stairway symbolized that heaven and earth are connected, but only God can bridge the chasm. Then Jacob saw hosts of angels ascending and descending on this stairway between the two realms, as effortlessly as one would cross a street. Their presence shattered his world. Suddenly, the realm of heaven was exceedingly present and near. Finally, Jacob's gaze focused even higher. At the top of the stairway was the Lord himself poised over him and blessing him with the promises of his fathers:

**When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." (Gen 28:16-17)**

Jacob's vision turned this "no-place" into a holy place, "the house of God," the axis point where heaven and earth intersect. In John's gospel we read that Nathanael was pondering Jacob's story when he encountered Jesus. On seeing Nathanael, Jesus said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit" (John 1:47). What a contrast to the patriarch Jacob! Nathanael was amazed, and he believed. But Jesus had even more to say:

**"You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'" (John 1:50-51)**

In the new order, Jesus becomes the ladder that bridges the chasm between heaven and earth. Now, Jacob's vision would be the experience of every Christian. When you got out of your car and came through those doors this morning, where did you think you were going? Why are you here? Are you hoping your spouse might hear something from the sermon and change their ways? Are you longing to be inspired by the music? Do you come lonely, looking for a friend? Or do you come to meet the living God? This is where we have come today, to "God's household...the church of the living God."

The church is the unique assembly of God's people who have been "called out" to enjoy his presence and be transformed by his holy life. It is not a spectator sport, but a real encounter. As Eugene Peterson affirms, "Holiness is the most attractive quality, the most intense experience, we ever get out of sheer *life* – authentic, undiluted, firsthand living, not life looked at and enjoyed from a distance."<sup>2</sup> The mystery of godliness begins not by doing, but by encountering a holy God who condescends to dwell in our midst. This should surprise us and strike us, as it did Jacob, with a sense of awe and fear.

The second metaphor Paul uses to describe us is "the pillar and foundation of the truth."

## B. In relation to the world

Columns were erected in the ancient world to support roof structures or to commemorate individuals that people wished to elevate with extraordinary distinction above the populace. The Temple of Artemis, located in the heart of Ephesus, had one hundred and seventeen 60-foot columns supporting the massive roof of this structure which was 420 feet long by 240 feet wide. Yet for all that impressive display, the Holy One was not to be found in that place. There was no truth there. Nothing that went on in that temple could bring support or stability to one's life. On the other hand, when the church in Ephesus met in their simple homes, the living God was present, imparting truth and stability to each member of the congregation.

After the Exodus from Egypt, God descended in a pillar of cloud and fire to lead his people through the wilderness. This was what gave the Israelites stability in the chaotic world of a fiery wilderness. Later, directly in front of Solomon's temple, Solomon had erected two 27-foot tall pillars, called Jachin ("He shall establish") and Boaz ("in it is strength") (1 Kgs 7:21), to symbolize that strength and stability are found only in relationship with Israel's God. Now with the advent of the Messiah, the true heavenly temple, which is his church, is being built worldwide. If we build on him, our lives will outlast history itself, as it says in John's Revelation, "Those who are victorious I will make pillars in the temple of my God" (Rev 3:12).

In summary, it is useless to try and motivate people to be godly by hurling holy exhortations at them. Instead, Paul begins by reminding us who we are. We are the very dwelling place of a Holy God. We have the awesome privilege of being his light to illuminate the world. In the midst of the world's pitiful columns and silly skyscrapers seeking heaven's recognition are the lives of God's people, standing tall, erect, stable, never to be moved. Being reminded of our true identity is the first step toward godliness. The second is found in verse 16, which gives us the proper focus for our worship.

## II. Our Focus in Worship (1 Tim 3:16)

**Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great:**

**He appeared in a body,  
was vindicated by the Spirit,  
was seen by angels,  
was preached among the nations,  
was believed on in the world,  
was taken up in glory. (3:16)**

Paul asserts that the secret to godliness has nothing to do with rules, performance, or anything external. No, "the way" to godliness is being captivated by the glory of a person and then having our lives reshaped by his story. Paul affirms that there is no denying the greatness of this mystery, one that is so majestic and sublime we encounter it not in didactic teaching but in a hymn. Following the pattern of Israel's poets who recounted God's acts of salvation in psalms to be sung by all Israel, the early Christians took that form and infused it with new content by adding the climactic act of Israel's salvation history as it is found in the work of Christ. In essence they obeyed the ancient injunction, "Sing to the LORD a new song; for he has done marvelous things" (Ps 98:1), anticipating the choir in the celestial city who "sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders" (Rev 14:3). Quinn confesses, "The noblest act of the church, its faith in and love of God, is cited here in the form in which it has been verbalized and chanted... The modern reader is left holding one leaf of the libretto of

an otherwise utterly lost opera. One only surmises the size of the lion from the claw."<sup>3</sup>

Though the fragment is a mere six lines of seventeen Greek words, its poetic beauty and rich content is a meal in itself. Some divide the hymn into two stanzas of three lines each, "the first alluding to the life of the historical incarnate Jesus on earth (he appeared, was vindicated and seen), and the second to the life of the exalted Lord (he was preached, believed on and glorified)."<sup>4</sup> From this viewpoint each stanza portrays Jesus' story as one from weakness and humiliation to glory.

Others divide the hymn into three couplets arranged in a chiasmic structure (a, b; b, a; a, b) alternating between earth and heaven and heaven and earth. This antiphonal echo of two choirs in two different realms expands our horizons beyond the imagination. Christ's mediatorial work is so much larger than our myopic vision, for it includes all nations; and then again, it extends beyond the human race, for it includes the entire angelic world; and it is more expansive than the earth, for it embraces all of heaven. Each couplet sets forth a new theme to capture our affections, from the revelation of Christ in his incarnation and resurrection, to the proclamation of Christ by both heavenly and human eyewitnesses, to the climactic reception of Christ, who is embraced and loved around the world, and exalted as David's rightful heir as he is gloriously crowned Lord of all at his ascension.

The act of singing the hymn is designed to expand our vision of the stage upon which Christ is presented, while simultaneously giving us a singular focus by fixing our gaze on the only one worthy of our worship, the "one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human" (2.5). "The *glory* which *was revealed in human flesh*, the life, death, and rising of Jesus, was attested by the extraordinary events that were part and parcel of the first preaching of Jesus as Lord and Christ. This same glory really belonged to another world and another order into which the Son had returned, to which he properly belonged, in which his faithful would join him, first by belief as they worshipped on earth (in creedal hymns such as this one) and finally (after their deaths) in eternal life itself."<sup>5</sup>

In the stillness of time the song begins to transform our inner life with heavenly appetites that transcend our earthly desires. As a result, God's passion and love for the world becomes our mission on earth. The song now becomes "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27).

**Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:17-18)**

Though this process of transformation remains a mystery, the fruit is quite evident, as we become a people characterized by a singular devotion and by large, embracing hearts.

Therefore the secret to victory over our warring sensual desires is not trying to resist them, but to crucify them and replace them with heavenly appetites. This is what Paul calls putting "on the new self, which is being renewed in the knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10). Sensual desires are so limiting in their scope. Once you begin to indulge them your appetite increases but the pleasure derived decreases until ultimately there is no feeling left in the soul. But with heavenly affections just the opposite occurs. Once you taste them it is like waking up from a dark dream as your horizons expand with new feelings and emotions that take you outside of yourself in compassion and service. Boasting gives way to listening, compassion overrules criticism, longings of lust are lost in a sea of love, and our deepest fears are stilled by a peace that surpasses comprehension.

Several years ago, I was called on to make a hospital visit for a young son of one of our families who was close to death. Though I believed in

the reality of the resurrection in my head, a fear of death still ruled my heart, so I went with a bit of fear and apprehension. After I entered the hospital room, another pastor assembled the family in a circle around the bed, and instead of praying, he suggested we sing Horatio Spafford's hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul." Nervously I began, but after the first verse, I went silent, not knowing the second. After a moment of silence, our nurse boomed out the second verse:

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,  
Let this blest assurance control,—  
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,  
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

On the heels of her resonant voice it was as if angels came into our room and we were strangely flooded with a mysterious peace as the sting of death gave way to holy love. I will never forget that night.

O Holy night, Angels sang,  
The grip of night grew limp,  
He appeared  
And each soul felt its worth.

Paul concludes this section on the mystery of godliness with a prophecy that sets forth the hostile environment within which we are to cultivate godliness.

### III. Environments Conducive to Godliness (1 Tim 4:1-5)

**The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer. (4:1-5)**

#### A. Conflict Guaranteed

Most commentaries mark a division in Paul's letter at the beginning of chapter 4, suggesting that he is introducing new and unrelated themes regarding demons, deception, and apostasy. The division is unfortunate since, as Quinn suggests, "A prophecy complements the hymn... qualifying its understanding with a slightly adversative *de* ["but" — "*But* the Spirit clearly says"], which effectively blocks a drift into an enthusiastic theology of glory.<sup>6</sup> There is an inherent danger, even with authentic worship, that encounters with the Holy may lead to self-absorbed isolation. Caught up the beauty of his holiness, we are tempted to say, like Peter, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah" (Mark 9:5). But encounters with God are not for their own sake; they are designed for the world he loves. As Eugene Peterson writes,

Holiness cannot be reduced to an emotional, devotional experience that we cultivate in order to "feel spiritual." It has command content to it. Holiness is not an experience of sublimity that abstracts us from the world of work; it is an invitation to enter into what God is doing and intending to get done in the world. And it's for everyone—this is not a text targeted to an elite spiritual aristocracy.<sup>7</sup>

But when the world around us is saturated with sin, and all the institutions that once constituted the moral fabric and spiritual infrastructures of the culture seem damaged beyond repair, it seems so logical to pack up and leave in order to create an alternate spiritual world somewhere else. No one perfected this art of "alternative spirituality" better than the Essenes. They were so appalled by the adultery and violence of Jerusalem, the corruption of the temple and its priesthood, and the

compromise of the Sadducees who had made their bed with the Romans, that they simply packed their bags and left to the desert to "make a highway for their God." There on the bluffs overlooking the Dead Sea they carved out a new community based on bodily discipline, rigorous study, and exacting precision in copying the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the "way" of the Essenes was not the Jesus "way." Though they prepared themselves to be the Green Berets of the kingdom, when the King arrived, they missed him.<sup>8</sup>

#### B. Want to get away? Forget it!

Feeling like you "want to get away?" Forget it! You'll miss the King and his great work of redemption. As both Paul and Jesus insist, we cannot cultivate authentic godliness in isolation from the evil that is in world. To the contrary, encounters with evil, especially within the inner circles of the church, are designed to intensify holy passions in the hearts of true believers. To make the point explicitly clear, the Spirit of God delivered a prophecy that the inauguration of God's kingdom, i.e. "the last days," has signaled the end of the devil's authority but has not removed his lying presence or sinister activity from planet earth. The eschaton will not be all sweetness and light, for "sin, struggle, and danger" coexist "with the Spirit in this age of incompleteness."<sup>9</sup>

Just as Jesus experienced the devil's hate in the betrayal of Judas, so too Christ's followers will experience apostasy and betrayal. Paul had earlier warned the elders in Ephesus that even some among their own ranks would become "savage wolves...and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number some will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). Those closest to us can have the greatest potential for wounding us, since our love for them is so great. When that happens it is not a sign that life is out of control, however; this is part of God's plan to make us godly. I have seen situations where a spouse committed apostasy, and what once was a family lukewarm in their faith soon became wholehearted in their devotion to Christ and fearless in their witness to the world.

To initiate apostasy, the devil uses "lying frauds" who have indulged sin so habitually they have "cauterized consciences."<sup>10</sup> Then in order to cover their sin and mask their dead souls, they become super passionate about religion, going above and beyond sensible behavior. They become obsessive about their diet and eccentric and austere when it comes to sex and marriage. Like graffiti that desecrates a painting, their religion sprays "Thou shall not..." over all the good things the Creator has commanded, "Thou shall..." In the words of Eugene Peterson, holiness becomes "banalized":

Holiness is reduced to blandness, the specialty of sectarian groups who reduce lie to behavior and clichés that can be certified as safe: goodness in a straitjacket, truth drained of mystery, beauty emasculated in ceramic knickknacks. Whenever I run up against this, I remember Ellen Glasgow's wonderful line in her autobiography. Of her a father, a Presbyterian elder full of rectitude and rigid with duty, she wrote, "He was entirely unselfish, and in his long life never committed a pleasure."<sup>11</sup>

What is the answer to all this? We can't escape the evil of the world, nor can we ever have a pure church. So do we pack our bags and leave California because the State Supreme Court struck down California laws that restrict marriage to heterosexual couples? Or do we storm the courts with Bibles in hand and beat the judges over the head?

#### C. Keep your head

Paul would say, O Christians, keep your heads about you. The fact that the world doesn't support our morals is not a bad thing. In fact, opposition is a healthier environment than a Christian ghetto to cultivate godliness. When there is a war on and the casualties are hitting home, we can no longer be casual about living. And we must remember that it is not laws that change hearts; it is people who have the laws written

on their hearts and model what it means to be fully human and alive. What an opportune time we live in! When it comes to food and sex, our world is swimming in the raw sewage of ignorance. But we Christians have the answers. And more than the answers: we possess the life of Creator who made them both. We know these things are good, because God declared them to be good by his word, and they become doubly good when we receive them with joy and thanksgiving. What California needs is not laws banning gay marriage, but compassionate Christians living among the gay community, modeling robust and healthy marriages that are tender and true to each other and equally as hospitable, generously cooking great meals and serving the best wine to the lonely and hurting of our world.

What might happen if we lived this way? The impact that the “mystery of godliness” had upon the licentious culture of Rome is “beautifully described by the unknown author of the ‘Epistola ad Diognetum,’ in the early part of the second century:

The Christians are not distinguished from other men by country, by language, nor by civil institutions. For they neither dwell in cities by themselves, nor use a peculiar tongue, nor lead a singular mode of life. They dwell in the Grecian or barbarian cities, as the case may be; they follow the usage of the country in dress, food, and other affairs of life. Yet they present a wonderful and confessedly paradoxical conduct. They dwell in their own native lands, but as strangers. They take part in all things, as citizens; and they suffer all things, as foreigners. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every native land is a foreign. They marry, like all others; they have children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have the table in common, but not wives. They are in the flesh, but do not live after the flesh. They live upon the earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the existing laws, and excel the laws by their lives. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, and yet they are condemned. They are killed and are made alive. They are poor and make many rich. They lack all things, and in all things abound. They are reproached, and glory in their reproaches. They are cursed, and they bless. They receive scorn, and they give honor. When punished, they rejoice, as being made alive. By the Jews they are attacked as aliens, and by the Greeks persecuted; and the cause of the enmity their enemies cannot tell. In short, what the soul is in the body, the Christians are in the world. The soul is diffused through all the members of the body, and the Christians are spread through the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, but it is not of the body; so the Christians dwell in the world, but are not of the world. The soul, invisible, keeps watch in the visible body; so also the Christians are seen to live in the world, but their piety is invisible. The flesh hates and wars against the soul, suffering no wrong from it, but because it resists fleshly pleasures; and the world hates the Christians with no reason, but that they resist its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh and members, by which it is hated; so the Christians love their haters... This lot God has assigned to the Christians in the world; and it cannot be taken from them.<sup>12</sup>

May that be our legacy. Amen.

1 George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 179.

2 Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 132.

3 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), (series title Eerdmans Critical Commentary), 318.

4 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 107.

5 Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 347.

6 Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 348.

7 Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 137.

8 For a masterful discussion on ancient “alternate ways” and their modern equivalents, see Eugene Peterson’s *The Jesus Way*, 191-271.

9 Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 288.

10 Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 355.

11 Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, 128.

12 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 2:9-10.

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