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1 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Seventh Message

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THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

SERIES: HOW TO RESTORE A CHURCH

In a *Time* essay entitled "The Year 2000, is it the end—or just the beginning?" Henry Grunwald wrote recently:

100 years ago, the French painter Andre Derain, contemplating the moral climate at the end of his century, complained that 'we are the mushrooms on ancient dunghills.' So here we are, an incredible, terrible, marvelous century later, nearing our own fin de siecle and fin de millennium. How do we measure up in comparison? We are beset by a whole range of discontents and confusions. For a great many, the dunghill has become a natural habitat. Derain and other observers of the depravity would, in fact, be stunned by the chaos of manners and speech, by the hellish ubiquity of crime and the easy—one might almost say democratic—availability of drugs; by the new varieties of decadence—rock songs about rape and suicide, pornography at the corner newsstand, commercials for S&M clubs on your friendly cable channel, not to mention telephone sex.

When we read things like this, we have to ask ourselves, How do we promote godliness in a world seemingly gone mad? And, secondly, how should we conduct ourselves in the household of God? This is the theme of our message this morning from Paul's first letter to Timothy. We remember what the apostle wrote in the opening verses of our text: "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, [I write] so that that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God" (1 Tim 3:14-15). From the background material which we have already studied we know that the moral climate of Ephesus, and indeed the whole Roman Empire, was far more decadent than our own age. Thus in this letter Paul advises Timothy how as a pastor he could promote godliness in that wicked first century environment.

Before we look at what we could describe as Paul's radical formula for godliness in the household of God, I will give the background to four different Jewish approaches to godliness that were practiced at the time of Jesus. I share these because it appears that many Christians today are resorting to one or more of these methods rather than attending to the inspired word of the apostle concerning godliness.

First, the Pharisees. Their approach to godliness in an immoral world was through the intensification of Torah—through law-keeping, in other words. They defined righteousness down to the minutest detail, leaving no questions unanswered as to what was righteous behavior and what was not. This approach was beneficial in that it gave one a sense of security. In a system where everything is rigidly defined, inner tensions are few. The problem with this, of course, is that everything is dealt with in an external fashion and nothing touches the heart.

Second, the Sadducees. These were the priestly class in Israel, the wealthy landowners. They did not believe in the resurrection or the supernatural. They were believers in the here and now, thus they enjoyed their wealth, prestige, and power. This, of course, is the way of compromise; it removes the tension of always having to go against the grain. True godliness is always counter-culture, but the Saddu-

cees' philosophy could be summed up in the phrase, "If you can't beat them, join them."

Third, the Essenes. They felt the world was so decadent it was impossible to maintain godliness, thus their approach was to flee to the desert in an effort to get away from evil. They took Isaiah 40:2 literally: "go prepare a way in the wilderness." In the desert they founded a new community based on rigid asceticism. This, they felt, would be the basis for the new covenant, which would culminate in a great deliverance at the end of the age for their godly remnant. In fact, one of the Qumran documents has the following quotation,

"For in a little while, I know

Thou wilt raise up survivors among Thy people
And a remnant within Thine inheritance." (1QH 6.7)

The benefit to this approach of the Essenes was that it put shoe leather, as it were, to their zeal. They simply put on their shoes and left for the desert, leaving behind the tensions inherent in trying to survive in an ungodly age. The problem with this approach was that it fostered self-righteousness. Furthermore, when the King arrived, the Essenes were still out in the desert. They missed the inauguration of the kingdom.

Fourth, the Zealots. They felt the existing powers were so decadent and oppressive, they decided to overthrow the government themselves. Their philosophy was, the end justifies the means. But this approach is very dangerous to the soul. If we insist on using the tactics of the enemy there is a great danger that we will become like him. Further, this approach removes the tension of having to wait for God's vindication. This is what happens when we seek to take control of our own destiny.

Now in the New Testament we learn that none of these approaches to godliness that I have just outlined—legalism, compromise, escape, or coercion—promotes true godliness. There is another, radically different way, taught by Jesus and his apostles, which Paul now goes on to deal with in this section of his letter to Timothy.

The apostle begins by describing what the church is.

I. Making known the high calling of the church (3:14-15)

I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, [I write] so that that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. (NASB)

You can never be godly until you first learn who you are. Godliness thus begins with identity. First, says the apostle,

(a) In relation to God

Christians have the privilege of being the holy congregation where the God personally dwells. The Greek word used for church here means, those who are called out to have a relationship with God. This word in turn is translated from the Hebrew word for congregation—the congregation of the Holy God—which is used all through the

OT. The church, therefore, is not a static, dead letter organization, but a living organism where the holy God dwells. If we are Christians, this is who we are; in this we find our identity.

The first time this expression “house of God” was used in the OT was when the patriarch Jacob had a dream in which he saw a ladder coming down from heaven, with the angels ascending and descending upon it. In that glorious scene, God descended from heaven and spoke to him, passing on the covenant he had made with Abraham concerning a land and a seed. Jacob awoke, filled with a sense of awe, and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven!” (Gen 28:16-17).

Godliness thus begins not by doing but by seeing. The holy God condescends to dwell in our midst! This should strike us, as it did Jacob, with a sense of awe and fear. All other attempts at godliness begin from the wrong starting point: they work from earth up to heaven, rather than viewing heaven as descending to earth.

And second,

(b) In relation to the world

The church, says Paul, is “the pillar and support of the truth” (3:15). Ephesus was the site of the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. One hundred and seventeen 60-foot tall columns supported 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, for 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 the homes of Christians, God himself came among the congregation, imparting truth and stability to the members.

In the OT, God descended in a pillar of cloud and fire to lead his people (Exod 13:21; 14:24). This was what gave the Israelites stability in the wilderness. Solomon’s temple had two large, 27-foot tall pillars erected in front, one called Jachin (“He shall establish”), and the other Boaz (“in it is strength”) (1 Kgs 7:21). Now in Christ, the true heavenly temple is being built, which is his church. If we build on him, our lives will outlast history itself, says the book of Revelation: “I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God” (in the New Jerusalem) (Rev 3:12). The magnificent Temple of Artemis, with its huge columns, is no longer there, but the church of God is still standing, having been erected on the sure foundation of the rock of Christ.

In summary, we find that it is useless to try and motivate people by hurling holy exhortations at them. Tell them who they are. That is the best method. Tell them that God has descended to dwell among his people, and that he has given Christians the marvelous responsibility of being his light to illuminate the world. This is what gives Christians a tremendous sense of dignity and a proper motivation for ethical behavior.

We have a very good example of this in the OT incident when David sent his men to Nabal to ask for provisions. Far from being generous with his possessions, Nabal instead humiliated David’s troops and sent them back half-naked. David was furious, and he vowed to slaughter the man. Abigail was caught in the middle. How could she motivate David to righteous behavior so that he would put off his anger and forgive her father Nabal? There is a wonderful lesson for all of us in her approach. Here is what she said when she met David: “Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant; for the Lord will certainly make for my lord an enduring house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord, and evil shall not be found in you all your days. And should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the

living with the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies He will sling out as from the hollow of a sling. And it shall come about when the Lord shall do for my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall appoint you ruler over Israel, that this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to my lord, both by having shed blood without cause and by my lord having avenged himself” (1 Sam 25:28-31).

Abigail reminded David that he was the Messianic King, that he would be the head of state. His occupation was to do holy things, as when he killed Goliath, the enemy of Israel, with a slingshot. She reminded him that in the face of his enemies, the Lord would take care of him. David would not want on his record the fact that as king he had shed someone’s blood in anger. Thus Abigail defused the anger of David. She did not berate him with holy exhortations, rather she reminded him of who he was, then from that basis, she spoke about ethics.

This is what we must emphasize. Know who you are. God lives in Christians. They are the light of the world. What a privilege, to be ambassadors for Christ!

The first step in godliness therefore is for Christians to discover their true identity.

We find the second step in 3:16, which is the center of our text today:

II. Making known the majesty of Christ (3:16)

And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness:

**He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Beheld by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.**

(a) Godliness begins by seeing, not doing

The mystery of godliness is not revealed by teaching morals, but by glorying in the Person of Jesus Christ. Our focus must be on Jesus and his story. Being captured by Christ is the first step to godliness. Spirituality, therefore, precedes morality.

Do you remember the NT story of Jesus’ encounter with Nathanael? Nathaniel was sitting under a fig tree, reading Genesis 28, the account of Jacob’s vision, when Jesus approached him. This man was wondering how could Jacob, a man of guile, be a patriarch of Israel. On seeing Nathanael, Jesus said, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile.” Nathanael was amazed, and he believed. Now hear what Jesus said to him, “Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these.” And He said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (John 1:50-51). The key to godliness, Jesus was saying, was seeing, not doing. In the new order, Jacob’s vision would be the experience of every Christian. We all will glory in the majesty of Christ, our gateway to heaven. This is how we become godly.

Then, once we have seen Christ as he truly is, our seeing leads to the next step.

(b) Being captivated by his person

We are drawn by the glory of Christ. And there is a sense of awe in the way this happens.

There are three things to note in this beautiful little hymn. Notice, first, that all the verbs are in the passive voice: manifested, justified, beheld, preached, believed, taken up. For Jesus, the mystery of god-

liness began in a passive mode. He was submissive to his heavenly Father because he trusted him. So the key to godliness is to trust the sovereign God.

As we look closely at this hymn we see that it is a story told in antiphony. It is as if there are two choirs, one on earth, the other in heaven. The first line is sung from the perspective of earth: "He was manifest in the flesh"; the second line is sung from a heavenly viewpoint: "Justified in the spirit," and so on. There is an echo between earth and heaven: earth in weakness, heaven, heaven (angels) earth, earth and heaven. This story is incredibly large in scope: it includes all the nations. It is much larger than the human race: it includes the angels. And it is much larger than earth: it includes heaven. Knowing this should expand the Christian's vision of the scope of this stage upon which Christ is presented. The fact that godliness has such an incredibly large stage, one of international and universal dimensions, should force us to our knees in worship.

Third, notice that this hymn is a story told from weakness to glory; and it is told twice. It begins in the weakness of Jesus' flesh: the incarnation was anything but a display of earthly grandeur. His vindication was pure spirit. And the greatest act of that vindication was the resurrection. Then, the angels watched at his ascension and they beheld that glory.

But God tells the story again, this time in the gospels: It is preached among the nations. And how was it proclaimed? In the weakness of the cross, a "stumbling block to Jew, and foolishness to Greeks." Yet, amazingly, it is believed by the nations who willingly bow down before this ascended Christ who was taken up in glory.

The way to destroy sensual appetites, therefore, is not only to crucify them, but to replace them with heavenly appetites that transcend the earthly. Sensual appetites are limited in their scope. Once you begin to indulge them, your appetite increases but your pleasure decreases until there is no feeling left in the soul. But it is not so with the heavenly appetites. Once you begin to indulge them you start to feel things you never experienced before. You feel a wider range and breadth of worship, transcending your former earthly pleasures. And the capacity of these heavenly appetites keeps increasing with the eternal pleasures of sweetness.

So godliness begins by first seeing Christ. Then we are captivated by him and drawn into his marvelous light and love.

Third, we rejoice in song because we are united with him. "Christ in you, the hope of glory," wrote the apostle in Colossians. Here, Paul breaks into a song of praise about Christ.

(c) Being united with Christ: Rejoicing

The apostle breaks into song because God's story is not only the story of Jesus, it is the story of every individual believer: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The way to be godly is by seeing the glory of Christ. Then, with an unveiled face, as we see that glory we become transformed from glory to glory. We don't know how or when this happens, but we are changed—by seeing, not by doing, as the apostle says in 2 Corinthians: "But we all with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). Thus the more you become captivated by Christ, the more his story becomes your story. Then you begin to glory in your weakness and you desire no earthly vindication for your life. You put off fleshly grandeur and learn to trust the Spirit for vindication. You see your life as being "beheld by angels." Then you take that gospel of weakness into the world and proclaim it, and you are awed as people enter and bow down to the risen Christ. This is not learned by formula at a conference where you are told to "do this and live." It will not work.

Godliness is not a formula; it is something that happens to you as you are captivated with this Person.

A good illustration here is the story of the two disciples who were walking on the road to Emmaus. Their faces were sad, their hearts downcast, following the crucifixion of their Master. Then Jesus began walking with them, but they did not recognize him. He asked them what they were discussing. When they told him that they had hoped the Messiah would redeem Israel, but now their hopes had been destroyed in the crucifixion, Jesus told them that their minds were dull. Then, beginning with Moses and the prophets, he opened up to them the Scriptures, explaining to them, not about Israel, but about himself. In his resurrection was the beginning of the vindication of Israel. The transcendent new kingdom, the heavenly temple was standing right in front of them, but they were blind and dull and they could not discern it. Then, it says, their hearts "burned." Jesus fed them a meal. Perhaps as he fed them they saw the scars in his hands, and their eyes were opened to behold him. This is how they became godly—they saw Jesus, and, as we have said, this is true godliness.

Christians, therefore, make known the high calling of the church. And second, believers set forth and focus upon the majesty of Christ. I urge you to read the gospels at times just for their own sake. Focus upon Christ and who he is—when he heals, when he prays, when he preaches—and you will become like him.

The third element that intensifies our godliness is a rather painful one. At times we will have to face apostasy, even in the midst of intimate circles.

III. By being undaunted by apostasy (4:1-5)

But the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, who forbid marriage [and advocate] abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully received by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Here Paul tells Timothy that there is another element—evil—that Christians have to deal with. He goes on to detail four things about apostasy in the church.

(a) Know it is predicted

But the Spirit explicitly says that in latter times some will fall away from the faith...

"Latter times" does not mean the two weeks before Jesus returns. This is referring to the entire age between Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ. But don't be surprised by this, says Paul. Some will "fall away from the faith." In these latter times, God is calling out a people for his own name. In that process, believers can't escape the tension of living with evil, not only in the world, but even in the church. The approach which the Essenes took won't work here. There is no escaping the evil of the world. Don't try to run away and start a pure church. Rather, live with that tension, not only in an ungodly world, but within the very ranks of leadership in a church or home. Know therefore that evil is predicted.

And secondly, know its source.

(b) Know the source: Not men, but devils

...some will fall away, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons...

I do not fully understand this mystery but, according to this, in order to become godly we must come face to face with the devil's influence upon someone we love. John 6, the story of the feeding of the five thousand, is a tale of apostasy. The multitudes returned next day, not for Jesus' teaching, but because they wanted more bread. When there was none offered, they left. The next scene takes place in the synagogue. The field narrows now; just the disciples are present. When Jesus tells them clearly who he is, and the implications of that, the text says, "many of the disciples went back to the things they had left behind." The apostasy goes further. In the next scene, Jesus tells the disciples, "Even one of you will betray me." Later, in the Garden, the apostles witness the betrayal of Jesus to the Romans through the kiss of the devil himself who had inhabited Judas, one of the disciples. Jesus was kissed by the devil!

When betrayal and apostasy occur, God is intensifying your love for godliness. Peter would later say to Jesus, following all the apostasy I have described, "I can't leave you; you have the words of eternal life." We have seen that the more intense the evil and persecution of the church in Eastern Europe, the purer the church became. Even in our own church I have seen situations where a spouse committed apostasy, and the result was that what was once a lukewarm family in the faith became purified and intense in its godliness as a result. It is true that 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; this is part of God's plan to make us godly. Apostasy, therefore, intensifies our godly affections.

Thirdly, Paul writes about the devil's methods.

(c) Know their methods

...by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, who forbid marriage [and advocate] abstaining from foods...

To initiate apostasy, the devil uses men and women who have indulged sin so habitually they have silenced their once healthy conscience; it has been "seared as with a branding iron." To cover their sin and the deadness of their souls, they resort to hypocrisy, even teaching about it. Calvin wrote, "Bad consciences that are branded by the hot iron of their evil deeds always resort to hypocrisy as an easy refuge, that is, they contrive hypocritical pretences to deceive the eyes of God." All they have left to deal with are the externals. Concerning hypocrisy, John Fletcher wrote, "A hypocrite hides wickedness under a cloak of goodness: clouds without rain, wells without water, trees without fruit, the ape of piety, the mask of sin, glorious without and carrion within. They do not put off evil but throw a cloak over it. The hypocrite spins his virtues from himself, spiderlike...The Christian has his virtues from above. The one is like marshy ground, the other is watered from heaven."

Now notice the doctrines of demons. What do they teach? Well, the hypocrite can teach but one thing: he specializes in externals; this is where he intensifies religion. For instance, he forbids marriage, he advocates abstaining from foods, etc. He appears overly zealous about these matters, beating the flesh into submission as a sign of purity. But these things don't even touch the spirit. They are of no value against fleshly indulgence. The Pharisees were scrupulous about fasting and tithing, but in their anger and hypocrisy they plotted the murder of Jesus. Legalistic people, though they seem zealous and godly, can be the most cruel and angry of all people. If someone comes on overly zealous about externals, you have to ask yourself, is there evil within? Are they covering up something?

Don't be taken in by these strange doctrines, says Paul. There is an antidote.

(d) Know the antidote: Balance

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

Don't be taken in. Be balanced. The Christian is to have the same approach to the creation as God. When God made the fruit of the land, he pronounced it good. Marriage is good. Sexuality is good. Food is good. The mark of the Christian is freedom, appreciation, and joy, not gloom and doom. Christians more than anyone else should be able to enjoy life. Unlike the non-Christian, we know how to enjoy the creation. We have the Word of God and prayer, and these two things sanctify all of life. Scripture tells us how to set a marriage to their proper use, sexuality to its proper use, and drink and food to its proper use. Let us avoid self-indulgence, but let us share great joy and appreciation as we live in the created order. And when we live like this, non-Christians find it very attractive. They will come, asking questions, because they have seen true godliness, not externals or hypocrisy, being demonstrated by God's grace, through God's people, his church.

Though it is painful, coming face to face with apostasy is part of the process of becoming godly and cultivating spiritual affections. But, if we remember that apostasy is predicted, and if we recognize the methods of the evil one, we shall not be thwarted by it.

I will close by reading how an unknown, second century author described Christians who had taken Paul's word seriously:

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...This lot God has assigned to the Christians in the world; and it cannot be taken from them.

May that be our legacy, too; not that of the Pharisee, the Sadducee, the Essene, or the Zealot, but that of the true Christian. Amen.

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