**GOSPEL CULTURE IN GOD’S HOUSEHOLD**

**GROWING IN GODLINESS**

**1 Timothy 3:14-16**

**INTRODUCTION**

What do you think about when you picture a mature Christian? What kind of person comes to mind when you imagine an ideal follower of Jesus?

Some of us may picture someone who is very passionate about Jesus. We think of a person who is “on fire” for the Lord, the kind of person who has both arms raised in worship and both eyes closed. When they pray, they pray rapidly and zealously with tears in their eyes. Many Christians believe that these are the marks of maturity.

Others say that it’s not passion that marks a person as mature, but knowledge. It’s the Christian apologists who are the most mature, people who have thought really long and deep about the Christian faith and have become our champions in the public arena. We think that they must be mature Christians because they debate atheists in secular universities, or they have advanced degrees, or they have their own radio programs.

Both of these qualities are certainly worth pursuing, but by themselves, they aren’t sufficient marks of Christian maturity. After all, the Pharisees had both. They were passionate scholars. They were zealous for the Lord. But there is such a thing as zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2), and there is such a thing as knowledge without understanding.

So if the defining mark of maturity isn’t passion or knowledge, then what is it? This is an essential question, because how we answer it will inform who we follow and what we aspire to become. If passion is the ultimate virtue, then we’ll align ourselves with the most exuberant and expressive people. If knowledge is the ultimate virtue, then we’ll follow them and think that the more knowledge we have the more mature we must be. But neither is the path of true Christian maturity.

Instead, true Christian maturity is defined by godliness. It’s the godliness of your character that reveals how mature you truly are. To be godly means to be like God, to be holy as he is holy, to love what he loves and hate what he hates. It’s to live a life that reflects God’s character in his wisdom, righteousness, justice, mercy, and love. It’s to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Passion and knowledge are good, but without godliness, they’re meaningless. They’re houses built on a foundation of sand. They may look nice for a season, but they won’t stand the test of time.

Godliness is the true mark of Christian maturity, which means that it must be the aim of every faithful follower of Jesus, because the Christian life isn’t stagnant. It’s dynamic. It’s not informative. It’s transformative. We’re not meant to remain as spiritual infants. We’re meant to grow up in the faith. To go on without growth in godliness is to be a spiritual infant long after you should have grown up.

Today’s text is about why we should pursue godliness, and it’s about how we should pursue godliness. My hope is that these verses will give us all a greater desire to grow in maturity by growing in godliness.

The title of this sermon is **Growing in Godliness**.

We will have two points today:

1. The Call to Godliness
2. The Key to Godliness

(1) **THE CALL TO GODLINESS**

Our text today has three parts. The first part is about the church in verse 15. The third part is about Christ in the second half of verse 16. Sandwiched in between these two statements is this phrase in verse 16a:

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness…”

This is the hinge of the text. It’s “the mystery of godliness”. We pursue godliness because of what Paul says about the church in verse 15, and we grow in godliness by beholding the truths about Christ in verse 16. And so, while we’re going to spend time thinking about both the church and Christ, we must never forget that Paul’s aim is to say something about how we are to grow into the great mystery of godliness.

Paul calls it a mystery because it seems so impossible. How can sinful men and women become godly? Salvation history tells us that they can’t. Even the heroes of the faith were inherently flawed and sinful by nature. What hope do we have to become godly? It’s a mystery. But the amazing thing about the gospel is that all the mysteries before Christ have been revealed in Christ. We live in the age when mysteries have been revealed, and he’s going to show us how in these verses.

But first, we need to understand why we should grow in godliness. We need to hear God’s call to his children to become more and more like him. We hear that call in verses 14-15:

“I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Notice what Paul says in verse 14. He says, “I hope to come to you soon”. Paul knew the value of face-to-face fellowship. The letters that he and Timothy exchanged were certainly better than nothing, but they were no substitute for being together. That’s a helpful reminder for us in the midst of this pandemic, that the barriers to being together shouldn’t diminish our desire to be together.

We should be grateful for emails and livestreams and phone calls, but we should never become satisfied with them. We’re meant to be together. We’re meant to be in one another’s homes. We’re meant to be greeting one another with handshakes and hugs. We’re meant to have face-to-face fellowship. And so, let’s all learn to say verse 14 to one another, “I hope to come to you soon.”

But there were some things that Paul needed to say that couldn’t wait. That’s why this letter exists. He wrote this letter to convey the urgent message that Paul needed Timothy to hear. What could have been so urgent and pressing?

The answer is in verse 15. Paul is writing so that Timothy and the church he led “may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Paul’s concerned about Christian behaviour. He feels an urgent need to remind Timothy that there’s a standard of moral conduct that must be met in the church. Churches often tell people to “Come as you are”, and that’s true. The church is for recovering sinners. You don’t need to clean up your life before you come to Christ. But it’s also true that if you come as you are, you won’t remain as you are. God will change you, and you will learn how to live in a way that pleases God.

There is a standard of Christian behaviour that is meant to be seen and experienced in the church. We may not all live out that standard in the same way, because like any household, there are spiritual babies, spiritual children, and spiritual adults. But one of the things that binds us together is the fact that we are all committed to the same standard.

What is that standard? It’s everything that we’ve already seen in the first three chapters of this letter, and it’s everything that we will see in the next three chapters of this letter. We read about it in Chapter 1 when Paul wrote about the aim of his charge being “love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” We read about it in Chapter 2 when Paul wrote about how Christian men are to pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling, and Christian women are to adorn themselves with modesty and self-control and commit themselves to good works.

We even read about it earlier in Chapter 3 when Paul was laying out the qualifications for elders and deacons. The leaders may be called to lead by example in these areas, but every one of us is called to grow into those qualities and let them characterize how we treat one another. We are to be faithful in our marriages. We are to be sober-minded, self-controlled, and respectable. We are to be hospitable, not drunkards, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not lovers of money. We must manage our households well, because strong churches depend on strong families. We must have a good reputation with outsiders, living with integrity and honesty, loving our enemies and forgiving those who wrong us.

That’s the standard we’re called to. That’s why Paul wrote this letter. This was so urgent to Paul that he couldn’t wait until he made it back to Timothy. It was urgent then, and it is urgent now. We must learn how we ought to behave in the household of God.

But why is it so important? It’s important because of what the church is. The nature of the church determines the conduct within it. Paul says that the church is three things:

“…you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

First, it’s the “household of God”. The church is God’s family. God is leading this family as the head of the home, which means that it ought to reflect what he values. He’s the one setting the agenda for the church, because he’s the one leading it. It is his precious family, and he is shaping it and molding it to reflect his glory.

When people walk into a church, they shouldn’t just say, “This is a religious community”. They should say, “This is a family.” More specifically, they should say, “This is the family of God.” They should sense our love for one another as well as God’s love for us. We belong to one another as brothers and sisters, but we also belong to God as his beloved children. He is our Father, and his desire is to mold us into his own image.

“…you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Second, Paul says that it’s “the church of the living God”. The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, which means “assembly”. This church, and every other faithful church around the world, is an assembly of the *living* God. Our God is the living God. He is not like the dead, lifeless idols of false religions. He is the living God, and it is his life that fills his church. The church lives because God lives. He is the God of life, and he is the giver of life, and he has given that life to his church.

“…you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Third, the church is “a pillar and buttress of the truth”. Some translations say “a pillar and foundation of the truth”, but the point is the same: the church exists to hold up something greater than itself. That’s the point of pillars and buttresses. They may have some inherent beauty, but the only reason why they exist is to put something else on display.

The same is true of the church. There is beauty in the church, but if we only see the people, we’ve missed what the church is meant to point us to: the truth. The church is a “pillar and buttress of the truth”. God’s truth is what ultimately matters.

Churches exist to put God’s truth on display, and they do that by what they proclaim and by how they live. If a church loses the truth, it’s lost the whole purpose of its existence. It’s like a lonely pillar in the midst of ancient ruins. People may walk by and notice it, but they’re not going to stand in awe of it. Instead, they’ll be left wondering at what it is that it once held up.

This is why God is calling us to godliness. It’s because only godly lives can display God’s truth. “The church” isn’t a building. This building isn’t a pillar of the truth. Churches can use buildings, they can meet in buildings, but they’re not buildings. They’re people. And that means that we are the ones who are holding up God’s truth. We are the ones putting it on display. So if people are to hear God’s truth and see God’s truth in action, it must be reflected in our lives.

(2) **THE KEY TO GODLINESS**

God is calling us to godliness because he wants to put the truth on display. But how do we grow in godliness? How do we increasingly become the kinds of people, and the kind of church, that holds up God’s truth for the world to see? How can our church become a strong, solid, unshakeable pillar of the truth? This leads us to our second point: The Key to Godliness.

If you were writing 1 Timothy, where would you go next as you were writing this letter? What would you say about how people are to grow in godliness? We would probably say something like, “Practice the spiritual disciplines”, “Read your Bible and pray”, “Go to church faithfully”, and that would all be helpful, because it’s through the ordinary means of grace that we grow in maturity, and Paul will get to much of that in Chapter 4.

But before he does that, he turns our attention away from ourselves to Jesus. Before he tells us about what we have to do, he reminds us of what Jesus has done. This is why the mystery of godliness is so great. It’s because godliness isn’t just obtained through our willpower and self-discipline. It’s obtained by beholding Jesus Christ.

And so, as Paul prepares to show us the path to godliness, he doesn’t give us “Five Principles for Living a Godly Life” or “Seven Habits for Your Sanctification”. He points us to Jesus. He waxes Christological. He exalts in the Son of God and puts him on display for us so that we can see Jesus more clearly and be transformed by him.

That’s the pattern for growth in godliness that we find in the New Testament. It’s by beholding Christ that we become like Christ, because our problem isn’t primarily in our heads. It’s in our hearts. We have hearts of ice that are cold and dead towards God, and only the heat of Christ’s love can melt them. We need more of Christ if we are to become more like Christ.

And so, Paul paints a picture of Christ for us in verse 16. It appears that he’s quoting an ancient hymn about Christ, a “Christ-hymn”, if you will. Scholars believe it’s a hymn because of its poetic structure (each line has a “passive verb followed by prepositional phrases employing the preposition *en* plus an anarthrous dative object” – Philip Towner), but it may also be a portion of an early catechism. Whatever it was, we must recognize that it’s poetry. It’s not a comprehensive summary of doctrine. It’s not a defence of the Christian faith. It’s a beautiful piece of art, and we must read it as such:

“He was manifested in the flesh,

vindicated by the Spirit,

seen by angels,

proclaimed among the nations,

believed on in the world,

taken up in glory.”

There’s no consensus on the structure of the poem, so I won’t spend much time on that. What I will point out is that every line is about Christ. *Christ* was manifested in the flesh. *Christ* was vindicated by the Spirit. *Christ* was seen by angels. *Christ* was proclaimed among the nations. *Christ* was believed on in the world. *Christ* was taken up in glory. Christ is the blazing center of this hymn because he is the key to true, lasting godliness.

And as we see, the poem begins with the mystery of the incarnation: “He was manifested in the flesh”. This first line captures both the humanity of Christ and the deity of Christ. Jesus didn’t originate in the flesh, because his birth didn’t mark his beginning. Rather, he was *manifested* in the flesh. He *revealed* who he already was when he became a man. The eternal one who was, and is, and is to come, entered time and space when he broke into our world when he entered the virgin’s womb. And he did that so that we could know him. He did that so that we could see the invisible God and speak with the Word of God himself. He became like us so that we could become like him.

The second line says that he was “vindicated by the Spirit”. This is a reference to the resurrection. To be “vindicated” is to be proven right or shown to be innocent. Jesus needed vindication. He needed to be pronounced innocent because he was pronounced guilty on the cross. God himself condemned him on the cross as he directed his holy wrath against us onto Jesus instead. He took our place. He bore our sins in his body on the tree. He was pronounced guilty for our sins and not for his own. He was pronounced guilty so that we could be pronounced innocent. His crucifixion was the vindication for all who belong to him.

Three days later the Spirt of God raised him from the dead. That was *his* vindication. It was through the resurrection that God declared him to be innocent. God declared to the world that this was indeed his beloved Son, and his sacrifice for our sins had been accepted. Paul writes in Romans 1:4,

“(Jesus) was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead”

The third line says that he was “seen by angels”. Jesus was seen by angels throughout his earthly ministry. Angels were there at his birth. They were there in the wilderness with him after he was tempted by the devil. They were there with him in the Garden of Gethsemane as he cried out, “Father, remove this cup from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done.” They were there when he rose again so that they could tell his disciples, “He is not here, for he has risen”.

The point of this line is to assure us that we can believe everything that Jesus said and did, because he didn’t just have an earthly audience. He had a heavenly audience. The angels themselves watched him accomplish all of God’s plans through his life, death, and resurrection.

The fourth line says that he was “proclaimed among the nations”. The good news of the gospel has always been meant to be brought to everyone regardless of culture or creed, race or religion. Christ is the Saviour of all people, the only mediator between God and man, and it is our immense privilege to proclaim him among the nations.

The fifth line says that he was “believed on in the world”. As Christ is proclaimed, people believe. That’s the only reason why any of us are here today. We are here because someone proclaimed Christ to us, and God infused that proclamation with divine power so that we would hear and believe. That’s the only way that any of us could believe. Our hearts are too hardened to choose God for ourselves. Our eyes are too weak to behold his glory in Christ. We need him to give us new hearts. We need him to open our blinded eyes. So if you’re a Christian, if you have put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, if you have believed on him, it’s because of him. We love because he loved us first.

Christ is proclaimed, and Christ is believed because God grants the power of belief. That is true of us who believe, and that is true of all who will believe. Christ is proclaimed among the nations and believed on in the world because God is at work. He is at work saving all whom he has chosen and bringing them back to himself.

The sixth line says that he was “taken up on glory”. Christ came into the world in the flesh, and he was taken out of the world in glory where he sits at the right hand of the Father. The crucified Christ is now the exalted Christ as he reigns over all things forever.

These are the truths that bring transformation. This is how we grow in godliness. The more we reflect on these truths about Christ, and the more we rejoice in them with all our might, the more we will become like him.

**CONCLUSION**

Perhaps you’re here today and you’re not a Christian, but you’re not happy with who you are. You keep doing the same foolish things. You keep hurting the people around you. You keep coasting along your life like a passenger, watching as your years slip away. You’ve tried to change yourself, but you can’t, and you don’t understand why.

The Bible says it’s because you have a problem that is far too great for you to overcome. It’s the problem of sin. You and I and everyone else who has ever lived have a sinful nature that inclines us to what is wrong rather than to what is right, and we can’t be free from it. We’re slaves to it. But Christ has come to set us free. He died for our sins to free us from our sins, so that we wouldn’t just be changed. We would be changed into the likeness of God himself. We would become people whose hearts reflect God’s heart, and whose lives reflect God’s beauty.

Coming to Jesus is the only way to find lasting change, the kind of change that isn’t just beautiful in the world’s eyes, but in God’s eyes. You will have to give up your sins. You will have to give up living for yourself, but God’s promise is that’s where true life is found. It’s those who lose their lives for Jesus who truly live. So come to him, and he will welcome you into his household. He will bring you into his assembly. He will make you a beautiful pillar for his truth, so that others would come to know him.

And to my brothers and sisters in Christ, my fellow members in God’s household, God wants you to grow in godliness. We don’t just need more passion. We don’t just need more knowledge. We need to become more like Jesus.

But we won’t become more like him if we’re never looking at him. We won’t become more like him if our attention is always fixed on our work, or our vacations, or our latest projects, or our entertainment, or our news, or ourselves, and never on our Saviour. We won’t become like him if we don’t know him.

But if we do know him, we will find lasting transformation, because the more we see him, the more he will melt our frozen hearts and awaken us to how we were always meant to live.

There are many ways that we can see Jesus and become more like him:

* Regular Bible reading
* Listening to Christ-centered sermons
* Reading other books that teach us about Jesus
* Singing and listening to Christ-centered worship songs

Whatever you choose to do, my prayer is that you would know Jesus more, that you would see him as he is, and that you may become like him. We are God’s household, the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. So let us represent his truth well by the godliness of our lives.