

Scripture Intro:

Good morning! If you have your Bibles open them or turn them on to 1 Timothy chapter 3. I really couldn't have picked a better text as my final sermon at Grace. I didn't plan it this way, it just worked out. So far in this letter from Paul to Timothy, Paul has delivered a fire hydrant style list of things to Timothy that he either needs to do or make sure is done in the church at Ephesus. And in our text for this morning, Paul seems transitions and gives Timothy fuel to live out the Christian life. Paul calls this the mystery of godliness. The secret to living out the Christian life.

Sermon Intro:

I was looking at Twitter this week and there was a short video someone posted where Nick Saban was explaining the way to be successful in life. And he's got some credibility in the success department, so I watched. And do you know what his answer was? Choose to do the more important things. Basically, decide not to fail anymore. Now, I'm not convinced that Nick Saban isn't really secretly a robot, so that might work for him, but I heard that and felt discouraged. I try to choose the right thing all the time and constantly fail.

As Christians, we certainly strive to live a certain way. All people, in some form or another, regardless of their religious affiliations want more for their lives. We want to love our families better. We want to be more disciplined in our work, our health and our spending. We want to prioritize things that we know are most important. And, under our own power, we all have limits to our abilities to see these desires realized in our lives. That's why Paul calls the pursuit of godliness a mystery.

And it's easy to read this passage in English and be slightly confused and think, "Well, if the apostle Paul doesn't know the path to godly living, how in the world could I ever hope to?"

But, that isn't what Paul is saying. Mystery is one of those words that has a different nuance in Greek than in modern English. We think of a mystery as something that we just won't ever understand. So we throw our hands up and say things like 'women are just a mystery.' But in Greek, a mystery is something that wasn't known, but is now. Something that might be unknown to a great number of people, but it is known now to some.

Paul knows the secret and in these three verses he gives it to us. He tells us what the mystery of godliness is and two implications of this mystery.

I. What the mystery is.

The mystery is Jesus! Jesus isn't one God among many. He isn't a myth. He isn't a crutch. He isn't even simply the most influential human to ever live. He is the only person to have every remained without sin, the only person to come back from the dead and the only person to credibly claim to be God Himself on a mission to bring us home. This is what Paul is wanting to communicate in verse 16.

Verse 16 is interesting because it seems like this was an already accepted hymn or prayer in most or all the churches at that time. Paul is using this existing hymn to show them that Jesus is the key to a godly life. So, let's walk through this one verse and see what Paul wants us to know about Jesus.

First, **He was manifested in the flesh.** The NIV says, 'He appeared in the flesh.' Jesus didn't begin to exist when He was born. He has always existed, but to bring the mystery to light, He appeared as a person. Fully God, yet fully man.

Second, **vindicated by the Spirit.** All Jesus' claims were substantiated when He died and came back to life. That was his vindication. On the cross, the Romans and Jews were wanting to show that this is not a special person. In fact, this was a guilty person who deserved the curse of the cross. But then Jesus comes back to life and in doing so was declared 'not guilty.' He was vindicated. And because He was vindicated, thousands believed on Him. If Jesus really resurrected, then He really does merit our devotion.

Third, he was **seen by angels.** It wasn't just humans who attest to His greatness and deity, all the angels in the heavenly realm do as well. Angels appear in the gospels before Jesus' birth, after His birth and during His ministry. But I think Paul here has in mind the angel at Jesus' tomb. Look at Matthew 29:

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like

dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen...

Fourth, he was **proclaimed among the nations**. The word went out to every tribe, tongue and nation. The Romans wanted to keep the news of Jesus quiet, but they couldn't. The word used for 'proclaimed' here is the same word that would have been used when there is a new Caesar. People to go to every city and announce or proclaim the new Lord. But this time, it was no Caesar, it was Jesus.

Fifth, not only was He proclaimed, He was **believed on in the world**. It wasn't just news, it was a movement. It wasn't just one class of people or one ethnicity or one geographical area, it was global. It was culture changing. It was the single biggest event in human history and has only grown for 2000 years. It may seem like Christianity is waning if you live in the global North and West, but in the South and East people are believing in Jesus at never before seen rates.

Sixth, and finally, he was **taken up in glory**. This, of course, is referring to His ascension. Jesus publicly ascended some feet off the ground, as JD brilliantly explained some weeks ago, and the fabric between our world and the heavenly world was torn open and Jesus passed through. He passed to where He currently rules all of space and time from one place. Where He constantly intercedes on our behalf to the Father. And where He gathers the saints in preparation for a triumphant return to the earth He is committed to renewing.

Paul knows that the key to a godly life is knowing Jesus. Any other world view might have six things we need to do to live a godlier life. I think almost every self-help book in Walmart falls into this category. Only Christianity, though, gives us six things that are already done in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is why we are here. Jesus is the mystery to godliness. And Jesus isn't asking a life of emotionless discipline, but one of joy. Joyful obedience. Joyfully living the life He created us to live.

And this mystery, according to Paul, comes with two very clear implications.

II. Implications of the mystery

Implication 1: We are the household of God.

Let's read verses 14 and 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...**

We are, collectively, as a local gathering of believers the household of the living God. So, what does that mean to be a part of the household of God? I can remember acting out of line in Sunday School growing up and the teacher said, "You're in God's house and that is not an appropriate way to act." If you grew up in church, you've likely heard that phrase before. I appreciate what my teacher was trying to communicate, but that isn't a Biblical way to think about a church building and it isn't at all what Paul is trying to communicate.

From Genesis to Revelation, one of the most significant themes we see develop is the theme of the temple. The temple simply means the physical place where God and man meet. The Garden of Eden was the first temple, but that idyllic meeting place was destroyed when man rebelled against God. Moses and the burning bush was a place God met uniquely with a man. Then, as the people of Israel were wandering through the wilderness, God instructs them to build a tabernacle. In the center of the Tabernacle is God's presence in some unique way that makes it the place God meets with His people. When the Israelites entered the promised land and settled, they built a more permanent temple under Kings David and Solomon. The center of that temple, then, became the place God's presence dwelt with His people. But it wouldn't stay there. God's people continued to stray and He removed His presence from that temple.

God had to pursue us in an even more significant way. John 1 says, **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...**

That word dwelt is literally 'tabernacled.' Jesus, God in flesh, became the temple. Jesus became the meeting place between God and man. And through Jesus' perfect life and death on the cross, he effectively mended the gap between us and God. And, because the the tension between us and God has been eradicated, a new and better temple is ushered in.

Now, if we trust and follow Jesus, the Spirit of God indwells us and we become the temple. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians: **Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?...For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.**

And in the DSV Bible, the Deep South Version, you can see that Paul isn't saying you, he's saying y'all. He doesn't say y'all are a bunch of little temples, he says y'all are the temple, singular. You, local congregation are the visible temple of God. It has nothing to do with the building we meet in, thankfully since we don't have one. It has everything to do with the Spirit living inside us.

And this has major implications for Lone Ranger Christianity. It's very popular to hear people say they believe in God, but it's a very private matter for them. Their relationship is 100% personal and 0% corporate. And even among your average Christian today, there is a premium put on private devotional time that far exceeds corporate worship. And please, don't hear me say that the premium on private devotional time should decrease in any way. I'm simply saying that understanding who we are in Jesus directly affects the value we place on the local gathering.

We were designed to live with God *and* His people. We were not designed to live the Christian life in isolation. You put me on a deserted island with just a Bible and I would not flourish. And that's not just because I'm an extreme extrovert. It would be true of you introverts as well. God designed us to worship Him together in community. And the culmination of that community is coming together on Sunday to sing together, to pray together, to repent together, to read and hear the Word taught together and to take communion together.

There is something powerful about the gathering of God's people. And, I'll add, that it's so important that God delayed Paul's arrival to Ephesus so that this message would be written and not delivered by mouth.

If we have Jesus, the mystery of godliness, we have the local church. They were never intended to be separated. So, the question we need to ask ourselves is what level of priority do we put on the local gathering? As our society becomes more individualistic and our ability to travel on the weekends increases, it has a real effect on our spiritual lives.

I was in campus ministry for about 10 years and I would, on a somewhat regular basis, hear from concerned parents that their children, when they went off to college, weren't making church a priority and their spiritual lives were not going well. I don't think I ever said this, but often I knew that these parents had not made the local gathering a priority during as the child grew up, so it didn't seem out of place to me that the child wouldn't either. Our time with our children is so short. Are we shaping their understanding of who they are as God's household?

When we are living in community and worshiping together, we are living the way we were designed to flourish. Everything that happens here is designed to soften our hearts and draw us to God through His Son, Jesus. And when that happens week after week, year after year, it shapes our understanding of who God is and who we are in Him. And so what happens? The implication, being the household of God, actually reinforces the mystery: Jesus. God gives us a duty, local worship, that actually makes the mystery, Jesus, more clear.

Implication 2: We are pillars and buttresses of the truth.

Ok, let's read the rest of verse 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, (and here it is) a pillar and buttress of the truth.**

The church is called to be a pillar and buttress of the truth. And Paul is doing something very intentional with his wording. In Ephesus, again, his audience, there was this enormous temple to the goddess Artemis. This temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was this massive structure with over 100 pillars, each about 60 feet tall and these pillars were supporting this superstructure of a roof that claimed to all around, the glory and wonder of the goddess Artemis and the Ephesian people.

Here is a picture of what we think that temple looked like.

So, if you know the story of the Ephesian church from Acts, you know that Paul had a lot of history with the worshippers of Artemis. In Acts 19, a riot broke out because the gospel was spreading and those who made money off of little trinkets and shrines to Artemis were losing money. And look what the people said in verses 26-28: **And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that the gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship. When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"**

And that's when the riot broke out. So, do you see what Paul is saying? In the same way that these astounding pillars support the false worship of the goddess Artemis, we

are to be the pillars supporting the true worship of the only God. John Stott says, “The Church depends on the truth for its existence; the truth depends on the church for its defense and proclamation.”

I wonder if Paul could have imagined the billions of pillars that would follow him to support the truth. And do you know how many pillars remain of Artemis’ temple? Not one. And our job to defend the truth is no easy task. In Paul’s day they were arguing about which truth was really true. In our day, we are arguing about whether truth really exists at all.

This week Tim Keller gave a talk to the British Parliament on what Christianity has to offer society in the 21st century. It was really fantastic and brilliantly thought through. But Keller makes the case that if truth is really up for grabs, then how can we really say that things like racism are bad? How can we really say that sexual predation is bad? We have these lofty ideals for the human race like the eradication of hunger in the world, suffering and illiteracy, but in the modern understanding of truth, there is no source for that. You can’t base hopes and aspirations for the world or yourself on nothing.

I’m willing to bet that 90% of the craziness that surrounds Trump’s Supreme Court nominee tomorrow has to do with our new understanding of truth. The Supreme Court gets to decide what the constitution says with much wider parameters than have ever been seen before. Justice Anthony Kennedy admits as much, as Keller points out, when he wrote this, “At the heart of liberty is the ability to define one’s own concept of existence, of the meaning of the universe and the meaning of life.”

Because of the fluidity of truth and the lack of a source for our views of life, the concept of life itself is fluid and you see this in our fetal homicide laws. In 38 states the mother has the right to kill the baby inside her, but if the mother is hit by a drunk driver and the baby dies as a result, it’s murder. In one case the baby is a life with value, in the other case it is not. That is what happens when you have ideals with no source.

The Ephesians did not want to be told the truth and our culture doesn’t want to be told there is such a thing as truth. But praise God for faithful pillars of the Christian faith who would not relent.

Keller points out three ways society was fundamentally changed by Christians standing for truth. First, in the area of human rights. Do you know that the first recorded person to speak out publicly against slavery was a Christian in 370 named Gregory the Bishop of

Nysa. He said, “How many obols (that’s a currency) for the image of God? How many staters did you get for selling the God-form human being? For Jesus Christ who knows the worth of human nature has said an entire cosmos is not worthy to be exchanged for a human soul. Who can buy a man or sell a man once you realize he’s in the image of God?”

He had the audacity to say that all people had inherent value. A totally foreign concept in the world outside of the teachings of the Bible. He was a pillar of truth.

A second way pillars truth have changed the world, sexual ethics. The Roman sex ethic was completely based on a shame and honor ethic. That meant that who you had sex with was based on how important you were, your place in the social order. If you were a man of high status, you could have sex with whomever you wanted. Your wife couldn’t. And no woman of lower social status could ever deny the man’s desire. Along comes Christianity and says that sex has to be consensual and covenantal and totally shifts the next 2000 years of sexual ethic in the world.

Third, speaking of a shame and honor society, the reason the entire west does not currently live in an honor shame culture is because of the Christian monks taking the gospel to the anglo-saxons and displaying love and forgiveness as a higher value than power and control. These were men and women defending truth even when the entire culture was pushing back.

Our call is to support truth. Not in a prideful, condescending way, but in a humble, loving way. So, very practically, how do we do this? First, we have to believe that there is such a thing as truth. John MacArthur defines truth as **That which is consistent with the mind, will, character, glory and being of God.**

So, how do we access that? Martin Luther, the reformer, said that before the fall, man would walk through the fields and the woods and hear God speaking truth. But then man rebelled. And although God never stopped speaking truth, we ceased to be able to hear it. So God had to speak more clearly because of our inability to hear and that mode of communication is the Bible. The truth of God revealed to us.

Once we believe in truth and have accessed truth, we need to know the truth. We need to read our Bibles, understand what it says and memorize it. And, lastly, we need to live this truth out. Now, none of us is perfect, but if our mouths speak about a truth our lives don’t display, we can do more to hinder the defense of the truth than support it.

And when the seeds of truth are planted within us, we have a duty to engage other world views. It does no one any good to stay in our truth bubble. Engaging other world views has a consequence on our pursuit of godliness. It sharpens us. The sharpest Christians I know are those who are actively engaging people they disagree with in a loving, patient and humble way. I think much of the success of Tim Keller is that he was in New York City for all these years where he was forced to engage and has become one of the sharpest Christians of our day.

And again, we have this implication or duty that actually reinforces and fuels the mystery of godliness. The more we support truth in a culture that increasingly denies the very existence of truth, the more we are changed by that very truth and the more our lives reflect the truth. And as that happens, the mystery becomes clearer.

Conclusion:

God has given us the key to a life of joy in Jesus, the mystery of godliness. There are isles of books at Walmart telling you what *you* can do to experience a better life. Saban can point you down the path of discipline, but I wouldn't call him a bundle of joy.

I know this is so hard to keep in our minds when we need it the most. When our money is tight, when our time is tight, when things are stressful at work or home and when our anxieties are high. My goodness, we know about high anxieties right now in the Davis house.

But it is in these times when we need to remember the most that only Jesus unlocks the road to joyful obedience. A joyful obedience that brings you into the household of God and commissions you as a pillar of truth.

