THE MYSTERY OF GODLINESS

1 Timothy 3:1-16

Key Verse: 15

“Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness 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.”

In chapter 1, Paul gave Timothy a general command to fight the good fight, manifesting the concise gospel that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, a trustworthy saving that deserves full acceptance. In chapter 2, Paul urged, first of all, that supplications, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for God wants all men to be saved. At this, he had to speak a marvelous theology that there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men. In this grace, men are to bear the role of prayer, and women, to learn the unfading beauty of a quite and submissive spirit. In chapter 3, Paul directly deals with the church leadership problem in Ephesus. He sets the qualifications of the oversees and deacons and how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God. Consequently, Paul presents the core of the mission of the church that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth, and the core of the message of the church that is, the mystery of godliness. Then, in chapter 4, a serious warning follows. So, in the middle of this epistle, at the end of the first half (ch1-3), and just before the second half (ch4-6), Paul places the core teaching of this epistle.

Verse 1 says, “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” As we studied, this brief statement, “here is a trustworthy saying” is written 5 times in the pastoral epistles, only in these epistles in the Bible (1:15; 3:1; 4:9; 2 Tim 2:11; Titus 3:8). This statement is connected by a familiar, well accepted, and approved doctrine in the early Christian churches. Such doctrines are of great value/significance, for it is about the person Christ and the work of Christ. However, in the case of 1 Timothy 3:1, this statement is related to an overseer and the work of overseer, not a doctrine about Christ. This indicates that raising Church leaders (overseers/shepherds/elders) is of substantial importance. For we see that church is the hope of the world, as Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth”, “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13, 14). If the church is corrupt, there is no hope in the world. The church of God is to be alive with no corruption. Yet, as we thought of, even some elders in the Ephesian church spread false doctrines. Paul knew the seriousness of the problem and gave a clear direction for Timothy to command these leaders to stop such teaching and behaviours. Clearly perceiving such a serious matter here Paul sets the qualifications of overseers/elders/shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-2).

First of all, being an overseer is the matter of one’s heart conviction from God: “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer.” It is not through taking certain course or completing certain curriculum. It is through heart to heart relationship with Christ Jesus based on his wonderful saving grace. It is as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:16, “When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” There is a compelling/convincing heart from God. With such a conviction an elder desires a noble/good task, quite different from worldly tasks, even government or good company tasks. For this task is the task of soul-saving related to people’s eternal destiny.

Then Paul sets qualifications for overseers. He says in verse 2, “Now the overseer must be above reproach.” “Being above reproach”, or “being blameless” in other translations, comes first. Being blameless or irreproachable is not just being aware of the eyes of people not to be caught with blame and reproach, but surely the result of living in the sight of God. One public reproach can damage one’s whole life credit and the church’s credibility as well. Accusing an elder is not to be dealt lightly. Paul says in 5:19, “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”

Paul continues in verse 2, “…the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospital, able to teach.” It is also very important for an overseer to be a one-woman man, a man whose heart and life is dedicated to one woman in Christ. Temperate is sober-minded, which is also related to self-controlled. We need to understand “self-controlled” correctly. Interestingly it is one of fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:23). “Self-controlled” is related to a well-disciplined mind that results in a well-disciplined life. There are those who control themselves well, organizing all things under their control in life. Each of them does so to seek and establish each one’s own kingdom, not God’s kingdom. However, here “self-controlled” is through Christ reigning in his life, through the mind being controlled by the Spirit (Ro 8:16). His mind is clear enough to order the priorities of his life in a proper way, truly seeking God’s kingdom first.

The next is “respectable”, which is in other translations, “of good behaviour.” This is the outcome of one’s inner life and morality. This word is in Greek *kosmios*, which comes from the idea of cosmos. The opposite of the word cosmos is the word chaos. We are not to have a chaotic lifestyle but an ordered lifestyle. In the ordered lifestyle an elder can be respectable for the cosmos of the kingdom of God. And an elder is also to be hospitable.

And an overseer is to be able to teach. “Able to teach” is in Greek one word, *didaktikon,* meaning skilled in teaching. We also know the word *didaskalia*, translated to teaching or instruction of doctrine. Yet, according to the list of the qualifications for an overseer, this is after the qualification of their inner character and life. One’s life is to support his teaching. Otherwise, the teaching cannot be effective. We are to note that *didaktikon* is a distinguishing factor between an elder and a deacon. The overall emphasis in this epistle, 1 Timothy and pastoral epistles, is teaching, didaktikon and didaskaia (doctrine). For example Paul says in 4:13, “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching, and 4:15, “Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress,” and 5:17, “The elders…are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” He also says in 2 Timothy 2:2, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others,” and 2:15, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” He also says in Titus 1:9, “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” May God raise up such precious Bible teachers among us, one by one!

In verse 3 Paul says, “not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” Here are four negative descriptions. Though all are considerable, we can think of “not a lover of money.” Though one does not intend to be rich, it is easy to be a lover of money out of fear and anxiety to survive in this world, putting security on the tangible money, not on God. Paul says in 6:10, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” We all should watch out that we do not fall into the love of money as we try to live by own effort, not by God’s provision. The prevention for this temptation is God’s promise of Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Verses 4 and 5 say, “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)” Obviously true.

Then in verse 6 Paul says, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.” It is extremely important to know that pride goes before destruction (Pro 16:18), applicable to anyone. The devil/Satan, called Lucifer, was one of the highest-ranking angels along with Gabriel and Michel adorned with all the glory and power and beauty. But when the devil did not keep his position because of s pride, he tragically fell beyond recovery. And in verse 7, “He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.” Again, watch out for any kind of trap of the devil.

Let’s briefly think about the qualifications for deacons. “Deacon” is in Greek, *diakonos* meaning “servant”, while *diakonia* means “service” and *diakoneō*, means “to serve”. These terms are used a lot in the New Testament. So deacons and servants go together. Concerning servants, we may think that their qualifications are lower than those of elders. But that’s not the case. Both requirements are equally valuable. Verse 8 says, “Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.”

“Worthy of respect” is *semnos*, meaning “serious.” It could be translated as “dignified.” It is the quality of character that makes people stand in awe of them. A deacon is to be a person with dignity, understanding the seriousness of life.

And the word “sincere” is in other translations, “not double-tongued.” “Double-tongued” is in Greek, *dilogos*. A deacon would be supposed to know many things about the church including private issues. But if he has double tongues, speaking two differing things at two different places about a same issue for his personal goals, how terrible it will be! A deacon should not be double-tongued. The idea is the integrity of speech. Deacons should be the persons who know how to speak with integrity. And “not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.”

Paul says in verse 9, “They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.”

Here “the deep truths of the faith” is “the mystery of the faith.” Paul uses the word “mystery,” *mustērion*, very often in his epistles. What he means by it is “something that was hidden and is not revealed. The mystery of the faith is regarding the truth which was hidden and is now revealed; therefore it equals New Testament revelation, that which was hidden from the past generations before the coming of Christ. New Testament truth encompasses the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, the mystery of the indwelling Christ, of the Jew and Gentile being one in Christ, of the saving gospel, of the rapture of the church. Deacons must keep hold of the mystery of the faith with a clear/pure conscience.

And verse 10 says, “They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.” It seems that since they have become deacons, they are not to be tested anymore, like passing a probation period in a company. Yet, they are constantly to be tested surely before God to the end. Here the word “first” is in other translation “also.” So, it can imply that an elder is also to be tested before God. The testing is an ongoing process.

Now in verse 11 Paul says, “In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.” Here “their wives” seem to be “women deacons” in the footnote. And “malicious talkers” is *diabolos* meaning the devil, or slanderer. So they are not to be slanderous like the devil.

And Paul says in verse 12, “A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.” The life of a deacon at home is the same as that of an elder’s.

Then Paul says in verse 13, “Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.” This gaining/reward is a good standing before men and our Lord Jesus’ complement, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

After mentioning the qualification of the church leaders, now Paul talks about God’s household, which is the church of the living God and about the mystery of godliness, whose source is Christ. Paul clearly states the purpose of writing this epistle, that is, people ought to know how to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God. What is the church? Church is in Greek e*kklēsia* means “called out,” certainly indicating those called out from the world to God, His group of called out ones. So the church is God’s household, God’s family. The word “household” or “family” is in Greek *oikos*, which is used three times in this passage. God’s household has a strong and precious bond in God’s love.

And the church is the church of the living God. The living God is opposed to dead idols. So the assembly of the living God is contrasted to the assembly of dead idols. In the city of Ephesus, the small assembly of believers, as an island in a sea of paganism and cultic worship of dead idols, was the assembly of the living God. All around them were those who worshipped dead idols. Paul seems to be speaking, “They are the assembly of a dead idol, but you are the assembly of the living God.” And so, Paul makes much of Timothy’s and the other believers’ identification.

And Paul says that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. What does this mean? Paul said in Ephesians 2:20 that God’s household is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Yes, this is an important concept of the church, God’s household. But here in 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul is using a different analogy, when he describes that the church is the pillar and the foundation of the truth. We know that God is the truth, or Christ Jesus is the truth. The church itself is not the truth, but the pillar and foundation of the truth. When Paul used the terms “pillar” and “foundation,” it is likely that Paul had in mind the foundation and pillars of the temple of Artemis/Diana in Ephesus (Ac 19:27). The temple had huge, massive, bulwarking foundation and 127 pillars supporting the tremendously heavy structure of the roof. The foundation and the pillars held up that whole structure.

In that imagery, the church, as the pillar and foundations of the truth, is to support the truth by preserving and upholding it. The church seems to do many things in the world. But truly this is of foremost importance. The church does not make the truth, but keeps the revealed truth, and defends the truth in this ever-changing world. We cannot alter it, we cannot modify it, we are to safeguard it. We must hold it as our most precious treasure. As that foundation in the temple of Diana and those pillars were a testimony to error and lies and paganism and cultic false religion, the church is to be the living support of the truth. So we hear it, memorize it, meditate on it, study it, obey it, defend it, live it and proclaim it. This is the heart of the mission of the church.

Then Paul says in verse 16, “Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness 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.” Here “beyond all question” is in Greek *homologoumenós*, meaning “as agreed”, “common consent,” so translated to “without controversy” “by common confession,” or “we confess.” What is beyond question and by common confession? It is that the mystery of godliness is great. This we confess and shout, as the people in Ephesus shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Ac 19:28), even some not knowing what they were shouting and why they were shouting. As for us we are to know what we confess and what we shout: Great is the mystery of godliness, whose source is Christ Jesus. Great is nonother than the mystery of Christ, that is the truth. So the conjunction is *hos*, “who.” So Paul continues in this expression, “he who…” Paul said in Ephesians 3:4, “…you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.” He also said in Colossians 1:27, “…the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory,” in 2:2, “…they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” and in 4:3, “…we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.”

Then let’s see the mystery of Christ Paul described here: “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.” This is a hymn. We see three contrasts, a body/flesh and the Spirit, angels and nations/people of nations and the world and glory/glory in heaven.

Firstly, “he appeared in a body/in the flesh.” This is the mystery of the incarnation, the humbleness of Christ. Paul described it this way in Philippians 2:6-7, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself…” John descried it this way in John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only…” The fundamental problem of mankind is pride, though each one is a mere creature receiving everything from God. The humility of Christ is the mystery that reveals God’s glory. We may not be found in the incarnation of the devil, but in the line of the incarnation of God, incarnate Christ, that is the first godliness.

And then “was vindicated by the Spirit.” When he came in a body, he took humanity to participate in their agonies and sufferings in life as Paul said in Hebrews 2:14, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity…” In doing so he was vulnerable being tempted in every way, but his life was sinless, holy and blameless, pure, set apart from sinners (Heb 4:15; 7:26). He lived as a good shepherd to the end. He lived a righteous and perfect life by the Spirit in him. When he died on the cross, it looked that he died tragically in helplessness like the death of all other men as the wages of sin. However, at the moment of his death a Roman centurion praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous man” (Lk 23:47). Moreover, he rose again from the dead and proved that he was indeed the sinless Son of God, as Paul said in Romans 1:4, “who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God.” He was vindicated by the Spirit. His whole life was justified and proved righteous by the Spirit.

“He was seen by angels.” At the time of his birth an angel of the Lord appeared and proclaimed it (Lk 2:20). When he had to escape from Herod’s murderous spirit, an angel of the Lord was with his parents and led them to Egypt (Mt. 2:1). At the time of temptation in a desert by the devil, angels attended him (Mk 1:13). When he prayed in Gethsemane before the cross, an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him (Lk 22:43). At the time of his arrest, twelve legions of angels could have protected him at his request. According to Colossians 2:15, the meaning of his death on the cross is that “having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” After his death he descended into Hades as a triumphant general seen by fallen angels (1 Peter 4:19; Jude 6). At the time of his resurrection angels came down from heaven and were present there at the tomb, and the guards were scattered to death (Mt 28:2-4). The angels both holy and fallen were witnesses of his whole life, particularly, his death and resurrection.

Truly his sinless holy life of serving was a mystery. His death on the cross was a mystery. So, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:-22-24, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” He also said 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Paul also confessed in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live but Christ lives in me.” What a mystery it is that when he died on the cross, shedding his blood, he washed away all my sins. When he was crucified, my old self was also crucified (Ro 6:6); my lustful self, self and self-centred self, fearful and fatalistic self, and proud self. For when he died, he died for all (2 Cor 5:14-15). God wants us go deeper in knowing this mystery. The resurrection of Christ was a mystery. So Paul said in Philippians 3:10-11, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” We really desire to learn resurrection faith.

“He was preached among the nations and was believed on in the world.” Undoubtedly, he was preached among the people of the nations in the world, to each individual. This is the love of God. We are reminded of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The risen Christ said to his disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will condemned” (Mk 16:15-16). Jesus also said, “The gospel must first be preached to all nations” (Mk 13:10). Since then the history of the world has been the history of the gospel preaching and many servants of God have dedicated their lives to the preaching of the gospel of salvation throughout history. And many from the nations of the world have come to Christ and believed on him generation after generation. God’s desire is that all nations may believe and obey him (Ro 16:26). In human history, no one could be preached and believed on like the man Christ Jesus. What a grace it is that we join in this mysterious work of God of Christ being preached and believed in this world.

“He was taken up in glory.” How glorious and mysterious his ascension was! He was taken up in a cloud to heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. God was pleased with his life. Now in heaven he is interceding for us (Ro 8:34). At the time of his ascension, he was promised to come back in the same way he went to heaven. What a mystery his coming again will be! As we studied, Jesus said in Luke 21:27, “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” Revelation 1:7 says, “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.” The mystery of his coming back will be fully shown to all. Paul said in Colossians 3:4, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you will also we appear with him in glory.” What a mystery! John also said in 1 John 2:2, “We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Truly, Christ is the mystery and the life with Christ, which is godliness, is a mystery. So the mystery of godliness is great. Praise God for the mystery of Christ and of the life with him. This is the heart of the message of the church. As we thought of, the heart of the mission of the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. May God raise up spiritual leaders who have the heart of the mission and message of the church.