

The True Nature of Godliness

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[0 : 00] As I said, we're continuing our series in 1 Timothy this morning. We've been working through the book of 1 Timothy thinking about what it means to be a healthy gospel church.

Let me read to us our passage this morning. We've come to the middle of the book. 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 14 and we'll continue to 4 verse 5.

Paul says, I hope to come to you soon, but I'm 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.

Great indeed we confess is the mystery of godliness. He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, and taken up in glory.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in the latter time some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

[1 : 15] For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.

For it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. Well the big question for us this morning is how do we live godly lives in a material world?

How do we live godly lives in a material world? You see there's been two classical responses in history. You have the embrace everything response, you might think of the Corinthians who said everything is permissible, we just ignore any kind of hesitations and just dive in.

Everything is to be consumed. But then there's the other end of the spectrum which is withdrawal from everything and you might think of the desert monks and of the past or people going into monasteries.

As the other end of the spectrum different ends of the scale, different swings of the pendulum and as you look back in history you'll see that spectrum of Christian responses all across history in relation to how we deal with the material world.

[2 : 34] Often like with everything when one generation swings in one direction the other generation will often respond by going to the other extreme. And I noticed that contrast while painting a fence once in St Andrews.

We were painting the fence in the maths and there was a bunch of church members, I was doing it with a bunch of church members and we got into talking about Harry Potter. And an older gentleman asked the question, is it right for Christians to read and watch Harry Potter because God's word talks about, says that witchcraft and magic and the occult are wrong and yet that's central to the plot of Harry Potter.

So is it wrong for Christians to enjoy Harry Potter? And it was very interesting because one of the students with us was just completely shocked that that question was even asked.

They never even thought that way. And their responses in part reflected their background. Well both actually had lots to learn from one another and we realised that as we had the conversation because some people might be very quick to reject anything that they think or whether it's literature or art or music or movies or whatever.

They might be quick to reject anything without thinking. Anything that they think maybe has a hint of sin. But on the other hand I would say my generation probably has the problem of embracing things without thinking and not even, and not learning to ask the question of whether something is beneficial for godliness.

[4 : 09] And I'm not going to tell you my opinion now from that discussion but the aim of this sermon isn't to draw a hard line through culture and ask what is permissible and what is not permissible.

Where the bible doesn't draw hard lines we mustn't draw hard lines either. And we have things to learn from one another all across generations. The most important thing though is that we learn from God's word.

It's God's word that gives us principles that we can apply and learn how that we live in a material world. What does godliness look like in a material world?

And 1 Timothy 4 is a great place to look at. It's one of those places where we get a few principles. Now I'll just say up front that 1 Timothy 4 is pushing in a particular direction.

It is pushing against asceticism as we'll see. It's complete withdrawal. So in a way it doesn't give the full picture of all the principles that God gives but we'll try to give a balanced picture as well as we go through the passage.

[5 : 16] And as I said throughout 1 Timothy we've been building a picture of what a healthy gospel church looks like. And you might say that in summary from this passage that here we learn a healthy gospel church, a godly church receives God's good creation with thanksgiving.

At first glance I don't know what you thought when you read verses 1 to 5. It might be a scene that they're just completely out of step with what we've read so far. Why does Paul suddenly start talking about asceticism?

You know we think what's it got to do with godly leadership which we saw earlier on in chapter 3 or which we'll see again later in chapter 4. And I think the key is to see it in context of verses 14 to 16.

So in our first point I want us to look at the goal of godliness in verses 14 to 16. You'll see the three points there. The goal of godliness, the danger of false godliness and true godliness.

So first of all the goal of godliness. Why does godliness matter at all? You might think that's a strange question to ask but it's an important place to begin. And if you look at verse 15 Paul reminds us that the purpose of the church as the household of god is to hold up and hold out the gospel.

[6 : 32] It's to be a pillar and buttress of the truth, defending the truth of the gospel and also proclaiming it to the world. And the church proclaims the gospel in two ways I'd suggest.

The church is a megaphone of the gospel and it's a shop window for the good news. And we were reminded of how the church is a megaphone of the gospel already in the past few chapters.

As the church defends and speaks the news, the church declares what God's word says. And that way it's a megaphone and we summarized, we saw that summary of the good news there in the children's talk that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners.

That is the message we proclaim. That is the only hope for this world and that's why so far in the letter Paul has spent so much time battling against false teaching that distorts this truth and means that people don't hear it and instead guarding the truth and helping us to be really clear about what the gospel is.

So the church is a megaphone of the truth. It's also a shop window of the gospel. That's what we're going to think about a lot today because it's a shop window as it displays the glory of Christ and the transforming power of the gospel.

[7 : 51] So God's intention is that the lives of his people aren't neutral but rather that they display and reflect something of God's glory in the way that we live.

And we've seen so much emphasis already on how we live, haven't we? We saw that in terms of what God's leaders should be like, the godly lives they should live. You know, the truth that we believe should transform what we do, how we think, what we say.

And of course we know that that transforming work isn't complete, is it? The church will, God's spirit is slowly changing us and helping us to live more and more godly lives but the transformation isn't complete.

In some ways then the church is like a shop window in progress. You know, we've only half put the clothes on the mannequins. You might say that it's like a half finished marble statue where you can see the true shape and image coming out but there's still bits of sin that need to be chipped off before the perfected image is shown.

That's what it's like with us. We're made in the image of God. We're being remade in God's image but sin is still needs to be chipped off before we perfectly display God as people, as the church.

[9 : 07] So in summary then, godliness matters because it is through the behavior of God's people that Christ and his gospel is displayed in this world.

That's God's intention, that the world looks at us and they see something of who God is and the gospel that we can proclaim that transforms.

But where do we live out that display? Is it on a Sunday? Well yes. Chapter 2 focuses on godliness when we gather, you might say.

But how many hours is that? If you add up Thursday night and maybe two services on a Sunday, that's five, six hours at the most. If you do the math, that's 3.5% of your week.

You see the main place where we display the gospel is not in these four walls but outside it. The world you might say is our stage, the church is the wings where we get ready, where we are encouraged, where we hear God's word and then we go out onto the world and there display God, God's character and there speak the gospel to everyone.

[10 : 22] Let me just pause to ask, do we realize this? Do we remember this? You see when Jesus says he's Lord, he's not just Lord of the 4% of our life when we're in here.

He intends to be Lord of also the 96% of our life when we're out there. The Dutch pastor and theologian Abraham Kuiper is famous for this quote that there is not one thumb's width in the whole domain of human history which Christ who is sovereign overall does not cry mine.

So when you're home and when you're cooking or washing up, Jesus says that's mine. Jesus says I should be in charge here. When we're, I don't know, going reeling unofficial, reading a book or watching TV or playing football in all those times, Jesus says it's mine.

When you're on your knees in the mud trying to help a lamb give a sheep give birth, Jesus says that's mine. Every aspect of our life should have Christ at the center and should be and the way we live and the way we speak should display something of God's glory.

Jesus is Lord of our lives. He intends that every aspect of our life, every crevice of our life displays the gospel in some ways there's no private life where every part of our life should speak of Christ.

[11 : 53] And that means we need to take godliness seriously, not just here, but all the time in all of life which brings us to our second point, the danger of false godliness.

You see if godly living is about displaying God's glory everywhere in the world, well then the question becomes practically then, well what can we do? You see we know that we live in a world that has, in a world that is fallen, in a world that has been tainted by sin and godliness and sin are completely opposed aren't they?

And so the question is how do we live godly lives in a material world that has been marred by sin? And one solution that Christians have turned to over the centuries is asceticism, is withdrawing from anything that might even have the hint of being contaminated by sin.

And at its extreme you might read of monks who were treated into the desert and adopted lives with being very careful about what they eat and maybe just withdrawing in general from anything.

And we might turn our noses up at that and you know that is the wrong point of view. In that, I mean just for one thing, it's not living out publicly Christ to the world.

[13 : 13] But before we turn our noses up we should also recognise that the best of asceticism you might say that at its best asceticism comes from a real desire to take God's holiness seriously and want to glorify him with all of life.

And I know for me at least, I don't know about for you, that I could grow in a zeal for the holiness of God and for a total dedication in all of life to godly living.

Now that doesn't look like asceticism and I just want to be clear and caveat another way that the error of asceticism that Paul is tackling here isn't about saying no to sin and cutting it off whatever the cost.

You know that is something that we must do. Jesus commands us, if our eye calls you to sin, cut it off. Cut it out. So cut it out. You know. And that might look like saying no to alcohol full stop to guard against the temptation of getting drunk.

It might look like downgrading your smartphone to a basic phone in order to flee the temptations of pornography. We have to be brutal with sin.

[14 : 26] The error of asceticism isn't about, isn't to do with Jesus' command of denying self taking up the cross and following him. That is something we must all do.

And in times that will look like forgoing and giving up good things that God has given us when we take that seriously.

So there's a few things about what asceticism is not. What asceticism is though. Let me define that for you. Asceticism here is the strict self denial of good things of God's creation as a measure of personal discipline or godliness.

I probably should have put that on the screen. But asceticism here is a strict denial of good things of God's creation as a measure of personal discipline or godliness.

That's the error we find being taught here in Ephesus where Timothy is ministering. And verses one to three, we see Paul warns against the false teachers who are teaching that.

[15 : 29] Let me just read verse three. We see what they're saying. They forbid marriage and they require abstinence from foods that God created. So what are they teaching?

Well, if we connect this with the legalistic teaching that we find in chapter one, basically they're saying that you have to abstain from God's good gifts like marriage or certain foods either in order to be a Christian or if you're going to be really taking the Christian life seriously.

If you're going to be really living a godly life. Now why is that serious? Let's look at verses one and two. We read that the spirit expressly says that in latter times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons through the insincerity of liars whose consciousness are seared.

To put that another way, people are stopping following Jesus because they're believing a lie that originates with the devil and is being spread by hypocritical liars.

The aesthetic teaching is extremely dangerous because it's causing people to walk away from Jesus. As we read in chapter one, it's causing people to make shipwreck of their faith.

[16 : 49] It's not surprising though then that we've Paul says that the teaching has its origin in demonic and Paul isn't being unnecessarily dramatic here.

Rather he's exposing the root of asceticism. It's not from God but it's of the devil. And you might think but surely Satan's speciality is, I don't know, pornography, not celibacy or it's gluttony, not starving ourselves.

But the devil's far more subtle than that. You know of course he wants adultery and gluttony but he's got more than one method of making people rebel against God.

What were the devil's first words in Genesis 3? He says, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree of the garden? And God didn't say that.

Rather God said, God gave Adam and Eve the whole garden to enjoy except one tree. He gave them a good creation where they can enjoy life with their Creator.

[17 : 54] But Satan twisted that prohibition of one tree and he, in order to portray God as if he was withholding all good from people.

And a variation of that same lie is what we find in the ascetic teaching in chapter 4. That Satan again wants us to see God as the withholder.

And this time he's trying to trick us to make us think that actually if we want to be really spiritual, if we want to be really godly, then we should withdraw as well.

And often the way that line manifests itself is presenting a sort of dualism between spiritual and physical and saying that spiritual is good and physical is bad, however you might define that.

So that's what the Jewish sects of the essence did. That might be where some of this teaching comes. That's what the Gnostics said. If these words mean nothing to you, don't worry. They're just groups of people in history that adopted this kind of teaching.

[18 : 53] And even a few church fathers like Tertullian regarded virginity as higher and holier than marriage. Thomas might correct me if I'm wrong with this later. He's the expert in church history though.

But this kind of ascetic teaching is just so, so wrong. All is right to call it demonic, we might think that's extreme. But he's right because at its core asceticism is an assault on the character and word of God.

Let me just explain what I mean by that. We read in Genesis 1 that God declared his creation good. And so when we say otherwise, well the first thing we're doing is rejecting God's decree.

That he created creation good. And the second thing that we do though, it's an assault on his character because when we say that God's creation isn't good or we portray it as if it isn't, we make out a false God.

We portray a false God to the world. So as a church we're called to display God's glory. That's what was our first point, right? And the world is going to have its opinion, shape to God, for either good or ill, depending on how we live.

[20 : 12] And if the world sees a church that acts as if God's creation, God's good creation is dirty and something that we have to move away from and unspiritual, then they're going to think that's what God is like.

And actually what we'll end up doing is not displaying the glory of God to this world, but rather you might say actually an idol of our own making will not be displaying the true character of God.

That's why this teaching is so damaging and dangerous. And it does have the potential to make people want nothing to do with Christianity and make Christians walk away from the faith when that kind of teaching is imposed on people.

So why do people fall into an ascetic way of thinking? If it's so bad, why do people fall into that thinking? Well I think partly it's because it pretends to offer a measurable degree of holiness.

In this way it fits in perfectly with the legalism that we thought of in chapter one. You see, you'll know in day to day life what's easier to do, to make, to hold off eating dinner or to control the thoughts of your mind.

[21 : 31] You know, what is it easier to do to say I'm not going to watch TV or to make sure that my words are always kind and generous and building up and never tear someone down?

It is far more easy to make man-made rules and obey them and put on an outward show of godliness in those kind of things than it is to actually truly obey God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

Asceticism might fool us into thinking that we're growing in holiness, but in actual fact our hearts won't be getting changed.

And the problem is we might fool ourselves but we don't fool God because he sees our hearts. And actually we don't fool most people around us either. We see that in verse two, we're reminded that this is being taught by insincere liars.

They're insincere, they're hypocrites. You'll see that throughout 1 Timothy. For one thing, you know, they're excessively drinking and greedy for money on one hand while saying marriage and food are bad.

[22 : 43] Their hypocrisy is obvious, but it's even more hypocritical when people act as if they're obeying God on an outward sense, if they're obeying strict rules.

But then if you look at that home life, actually you end up meeting this person at another time and you get to know them more, you'll hear harsh words, an aggressive attitude, someone being uncaring or gossipy or whatever.

That kind of hypocrisy is one of the most off-putting things to the outsider looking in. And that's another reason asceticism is so dangerous.

We're meant to be a church that displays God's glory and gathers people in and not puts them off with that kind of hypocrisy. Now I'm not pinning this on, even though when I say us, I'm not pinning that on people here, I'm more taking the principle that we see in one Timothy.

But we do need to be careful as well that we don't fall into the same kind of way of thinking. We really do. And so before, as we do that, I want to move us on to our third point, where Paul gives us some principles of how we enjoy and live in this creation.

[24 : 03] So finally, true godliness. But in summary, true godliness enjoys God's good creation with Thanksgiving. Those are the principles you might say that were given in verses 3 to 5.

And let me just unpack that. We've already mentioned our first principle that God has created things good. So if you look in verse 4, we read, for everything created by God is good.

That's the first part of our principle and it's made to be received by us. We were reminded of that in Genesis and we see God's good creation every day. I don't know, did you guys see the northern lights last night?

They were beautiful. They were fantastic. You know, we see God's good creation. We see lambs staggering to their feet. I love lambs. I mean, I just haven't seen enough and now I'm enjoying them.

We see them bouncing about. We enjoy God's good creation as we smell coffee in the morning and as we eat a nice bacon sandwich. I just hope there's no vegetarians here, but it's true.

[25 : 04] The tears, we enjoy God's good creation as we spend time together. You know, as we share jokes, as we laugh until the tears are rolling down our face, that is all part of enjoying God's good creation.

God created this world for humanity to enjoy, to not enjoy separate from Him, but to enjoy as an extension of enjoying Him.

Second principle is in verse five that we enjoy good, we enjoy creation, not just because God has called it good, but because God's intention is that our enjoyment of creation, our use of creation becomes part of worship to Him.

So we see in verse five, we read that the creation is made holy by the word of God and prayer. So the word of God is God saying this creation is good in Genesis.

And when we talk about prayer, we see that there's this theme of thanksgiving as mentioned in verse three and four. So it's speaking about not a magical prayer, but a heart attitude of thanksgiving as we enjoy God's creation.

[26 : 16] Now all of life should be an act of worship to God, not just time in here, but all of life. And the creation you might say is the stage on which we worship God.

God's creation, when we say that God's creation is made holy, what Paul is saying is that it's made fit for worship. God's good creation is made into like instrument vessels in the temple that we use for the worship of God.

When we enjoy creation with thanksgiving, this creation becomes, and that attitude and action becomes part of worship to God.

Now I can only kind of just mention that here and that maybe we should talk about that more, but I think that's just amazing. God don't only declares it's good, but He gives us creation and all parts of life to be used as worship to Him.

So those are two principles. God has created us, given us a good creation to be received with thanksgiving. Now that doesn't mean that humans can't spoil things, though, does it?

[27 : 21] Now let's just look at the examples that Timothy gives us, first of all. You see, let's just take, for example, marriage and sex that he mentions here.

God has created marriage as a gift. It's a good thing for a man and a woman to be joined together in life-long union. It's the best environment for raising children. It's a wonderful way in which people can be welcomed in and to learn about Christ.

Now marriage, though, as we know, has been corrupted by sin. People are forced into marriages. Domestic abuse changes what should be a safe place into a place of fear, adultery shatters that trust and faithfulness.

But that doesn't mean we make marriage bad, though. I'm sure we'd all agree that. And the same is true with sex. That's probably what's underlying this forbidding of marriage here.

But God created sex as well, to be a good gift that is to be enjoyed between one man and one woman. We know that sex too has been corrupted in this world by pornography, adultery, fornication, all of these ways.

[28 : 38] But that doesn't make sex wrong, does it? God still created it for man and woman to be enjoyed in marriage for good.

Do we agree? I say that partly because I'm remembering a funny story that my friend told me when he was sitting in church, and this is in America, and his pastor was preaching on this very passage.

And at this point, he said, sex is good. Can I have an amen? And my friend was just wanting to die in his seat. He just wanted the ground to swallow him up because he was sitting between his parents.

And at that moment, his dad went, amen. So I'm not going to ask us that. But the point is that God has created these things that are good.

And I mention it because we can become embarrassed talking about something like sex. We can treat it as dirty, but that's not God's intention.

[29 : 36] Yes, it might have been abused by the world. Yes, the world might act as if sex is ultimate, and that's wrong. But we mustn't allow that to push us away from calling what God calls good.

Good. We mustn't, you know, if the world, while the pendulum might have swung that way for the world, we mustn't let that push us to the other extreme and treat it as dirty.

So even just distill it down to the physical act of procreation. You know, 1 Timothy chapter 6 verse 17 says that God gives us all good things to enjoy and includes sex.

We mustn't let the misuse of God's creation cause us to treat something that is bad, something as bad that God has declared as good. Now, don't worry, I'm not going to mention sex anymore.

Now we can make the same error though with food. I'll just mention that briefly. Gluttony is wrong, for example, that doesn't make all foods bad. Food is a good part of God's creation. It's not more spiritual, sweet porridge than steak.

[30 : 43] Okay? So, so far so good. But even just, this becomes much harder, you'll know. It becomes much harder to discern how to enjoy God's creation, the more that people are involved in that creating process.

Because we know that everything that we're involved with becomes tainted by sin. An obvious example is something like the internet. You know, the internet is a wonderful tool that can be used to just discover and enjoy and find out more about God's creation to link up with people.

And we saw how useful it was even for the worship of God during lockdown. We were able to gather and speak to one another and have church services on Zoom.

But the internet is also one of the darkest places in this world. There's, you know, people trade in terrible things. You have the dark caves of pornography where people's lives are twisted and ruined.

There's a corruption of self-image. There's spreading of lies. But just because something that we have created as created beings, as those who, you know, create because we are made in the image of our Creator, just because something that we make is, has been tainted and can be abused, that doesn't make it wrong.

[32 : 05] And the same is true for something like alcohol as well. Jesus himself drank wine. Alcohol isn't wrong in and of itself.

Yes, it's abused. It's from the earliest chapters of the Bible. We're made of no planting a vineyard and getting drunk. But that doesn't make it wrong in and of itself.

We need great wisdom in a world that is infected by sin. It's not as simple as just saying, well, I'm just going to throw away everything that might have a hint of sin.

That's what Paul's point is here. In many ways, I mean, that's like the Amish do, you might think, actually. Wisdom calls for us to, wisdom may call for some people to be T-total in order to flee sin.

And it may call for, for us to actually also abstain from alcohol sometimes in order to stop a brother or sister from stumbling. However, this, what the, this passage is teaching and reminding us is to not make a rule out of something that God, when God hasn't made that rule, do not add to his word in this way.

[33 : 25] So Godly living in a material world requires lots of wisdom. And really, just as we finish up, I just want to say kind of one more point because this gets harder and often the difficulty is thinking about how we engage with stuff like the arts and culture.

I mentioned Harry Potter at the beginning. And we don't have time to do this massive topic justice. And can I encourage you that if you want to think more in depth about the Christian theology of engaging with arts and culture, this book, Popologetics, is really good.

Feel free to borrow it from me or buy yourself a copy. And I hope also that this is a conversation starter, this sermon. And do come along on Thursday.

We'll be talking about and thinking about this more and we can dive more into specific issues with engaging with arts and culture. But let me just give you four principles that I have learned from wise people and from books in terms of engaging with that.

First of all, the Bible tells us to flee what is evil and cling to what is good. And engaging with culture is never an excuse to dabble to sin or for putting our hand in the fire of temptation.

[34 : 42] That's the first. Second, we mustn't be a cultural snob or elitist. Pop culture isn't inherently inferior to classical or traditional culture.

And we need to just understand that. There might be, we might have different preferences and tastes, but we mustn't extend those preferences into saying that one thing is better or right or more godly and one thing is wrong.

Third, few things are black and white. Can I encourage you guys to read and to watch and listen to the narratives in whether it's in music or in books or in films or paintings or whatever, to look at the narrative, to try to understand it and to rejoice in what is good, in the beauty that's found there and praise God for it.

But also to identify what is distorted, identify what is ugly and seek not to be conformed by it. And different people will need to be reminded of those aspects more than others.

As I said, my generation probably needs to be better at being discerning and identifying, actually, this can have a real forming effect on me if I'm not careful.

[35 : 59] Fourthly, and most importantly really, saying how does the Gospel apply? Both from, we need to ask how does the Gospel speak into this?

As we see the depth and the brokenness of sin, as we see the goodness, we can be reminded of, we can see Gospel, we can see the need for the Gospel and we can see what the world should be like even in literature.

We can often see redemptive patterns in stories. And can I suggest that when we engage properly with culture, that will help and not hinder our witness to the world.

That will help us to be able to talk about things that people are enjoying and are involved with in a way that doesn't just dismiss it, but in a way that helps people to see an alternative world of you and understand things from the Bible's perspective, not just dismissing it, but engaging in it and using it to think and using it to see God and to think about our need for the Gospel and witness for Christ.

So can I encourage you all to think on that? We need to flee from sin, but also embrace what is good. We need to be discerning and wise and we need to take God's good creation with both hands and enjoy what is good.

[37 : 23] Enjoy it with all our might and with thanksgiving in our hearts. And such, and when we do that, we'll be able to display Christ and His Gospel in everything we do.

To Him be the glory forever. Amen. Let's pray. Amen.