

Week Four: 1Tim 3:14-4:10

“Wise and Foolish”

1 Ti 3:14-4:10 (ESV) I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 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. 16 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,
taken up in glory.”*

4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, 2 through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, 3 who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4 For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, 5 for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

6 If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. 9 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. 10 For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Paul starts with mystery and ends with clarity. The mystery is something God had not clearly revealed before, but is now it is clear, and it is the very reason we live. And because we live knowing this new revelation we know where we are going and Paul wants to make sure we do not stumble on the way. Or worse, we may shipwreck and end up isolated and alone. Paul does not mince words in his purpose for this letter: *so that...you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God.* This is very personal because he says to Timothy “these things are for YOU.” This is emphatic. Every instruction and warning from verses 3:14 to 4:8 is directed at Timothy. He says “Timothy, YOU train yourself for godliness...”(4:7). Paul gave instructions for leaders in 3:1-13 and now he wants to make sure the “leader of the leaders” is one step ahead of them.

But in 4:9-10 Paul goes back to saying *WE*. We are in this together and he says our goal, our end-point, is very clear: *For to this end WE toil and strive...* For what end? For godliness. It is the value we seek. The toil and the striving and the training is for behavior that reflects and represents our Lord, our King. Our goal in this life is godliness because *it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.* This is maybe brings some clarity to what Paul said before: *The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1:5)* This

is the goal, and hopefully the result, of good teaching. Sound doctrine changes us on the inside. But what about the outside? What do people see us *DOING*? And is it what we *DO* that changes us? Our toil and striving and training? No! It is the transformed heart, *because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people(1:10*, that gives us the desire to toil and strive. Our hope is in the living God that Paul and Timothy served, the same Savior. We can picture ourselves with them at the end, in the age to come, when we will all stand with the saints of the Church and Israel and even all the way back to the beginning. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Heb 12:1)* The Christian life is a race, an endurance contest. We must find the strength of mind and body to finish well.

The mind is a funny thing. We are always analyzing and asking questions, wanting to know the *real meaning* behind something we can't quite figure out. We take great pride in our solutions, even though many times they prove faulty or even totally wrong. Then we get under pressure. An illness, an attack or threat from an enemy, anger from within, or fear of the unknown. It is then the mind stops analyzing and is in chaos. Nothing makes sense! Think of a time when you felt like this. It is then someone comes with what we call a "platitude", something stated so simply that it is easily grasped and provides a sense of relief. It is something like *Just Live For Today* or *Easy Does It*. These sayings do not answer all the questions of life, but they calm us and bring us back to focus on the moment, to see that right now I am OK. Take a breath! This is what Paul is doing as he writes the poem that he says proclaims the Great Mystery of Godliness. And it is where my mind goes to work analyzing and trying to figure out what it all means as I sit in the comfort of my quiet office. If this is the secret of godliness, then we must find out what it is!

First I ask, "What is godliness?" Some translate the underlying Greek word as *religion*, but I have come to like the word godliness. Religion in our modern world has all kinds of nasty connotations, especially for the man on the street. What we really want to know is what did the word godliness or religion mean to Paul? Tom Wright in his grand biography of the life of Paul helps us to understand. He says:

*[Godliness] consisted of God-related activities that, along with politics and community life, held a culture together and bound the members of that culture to its gods and to each other. In the modern Western world, religion tends to mean God-related individual beliefs and practices that are supposedly separable from culture, politics, and community life. For Paul, religion was woven in with all of life: for the modern Western world, it is separated from it. So when, (in the letter to the Galatians), Paul talks about "advancing in Judaism beyond any of his age", the word Judaism refers not to "religion" but to an activity: the zealous propagation and defense of the ancestral way of life."*¹

Now Paul sees *the ancestral way of life* he knew from the Torah and the Temple as fully revealed in Jesus. He is just as zealous in defending and propagating the Gospel of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ as he was in his defense of the Kingdom promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because he sees Jesus as the fulfillment of it all. The big difference for Paul is his zeal does not lead him to kill God's enemies, but to love God's enemies. That is the kind of zeal he learned from Jesus. He sees in the resurrection the grand future that is already being manifested in the present. This means new people

acting in new ways, not according to the old ancestral traditions. This is not a new religion as we think of it. It is new creation. It is true Godliness. Everything has changed!

So this little poem is like taking a breath after reading what God expects of the leaders of His church. Expectations this demanding can throw our minds into a turmoil of uncertainty and doubt as Paul paints the image of near perfection in a leader and then gives the warnings about the devil leading even the best of us to a place of condemnation and disgrace! The poem doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know but it tells us everything God wants us to know and it appeals to the need of our hearts. It assures we are not in this race alone. We may have the desire to become godly and we want to know what to do. But the most important point is we have to know the One for whom we are doing it.

That is the point of the poem that releases its essence, like an expensive perfume, in just six lines. This sounds like a mystery, but this is not a mystery. It is the heart of a true story. It is the story of the God who became human and who now rules the whole world. This is not religion as we think of it. This is the "way of service and faith and discipleship and hope."² The way of godliness is the way of wisdom. It is the ultimate wisdom and godliness revealed in Jesus who is now in Glory.

*He was revealed in the flesh,
was justified by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was proclaimed among the nations,
was believed in the world,
was taken up in glory.*

If I were to read this in its original language you would hear the meter and the rhyme. It is too bad it doesn't translate that way. But the meaning is the same in any language. It is six lines in three pairs with the focal point in the center pair. It is very easy to memorize yet it allows for profound meditation because of its simplicity. It can move us to desire godliness because of its profound implications. No one knows its origins or who wrote it. But Paul saw it as a tool to focus the mind on the majesty of Jesus

The first pair on lines, *revealed in the flesh and justified in the spirit*, reminds us that God has become truly human. The Roman Caesars, even though human, had ascended to deity, so the Greek Roman religion believed humans do become gods. But a god lowering himself to become human? Never! But our God is willing not only to condescend and become a human but also to suffer and die as a human. But after His death, His entire life is justified, vindicated, through the power of His Spirit when Jesus was raised from the dead. These opening lines are the gospel message, *Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead*, in poetic language.

Let's look at the third pair before moving to the central focus. *Believed in the world and taken up in glory*. He was *taken up* to heaven after His message was believed, that this God could justify not only His own people but the rest world. He was *taken up* after many believed that He is truly alive and will return. For Paul and the early Christian Church, believing in Jesus after He ascended meant He had their full trust in who He is. They were zealously loyal to His cause. They gave Him their full allegiance as the One already ruling as Lord of the nations. Their faith was in His victory.

This brings us to the center; *Seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations!* The angels watched the drama unfold. They were visible at Bethlehem, and were onlookers as they heard the Father say from heaven *This is My Beloved Son* at His baptism by

John and His transfiguration on the mount. They certainly looked on with horror at the crucifixion, but then they got to witness the glory of His resurrection. They were given the honor of announcing to the first humans *He is not here, He is risen!* Now Jesus has gone back ahead of us to the realm of heaven, among those same angels, until the time when He will be revealed again. This is the heart of it. Think of it, at a time when Caesar is announcing to his Empire that he is the true Lord and the world must obey and worship him, the Church is claiming "*Jesus is the King risen from death and He is the true Lord of the world.*" This is battle for allegiance. Who will you worship? Caesar or the crucified Jew they claim to be Messiah? No only will your choice determine your place in the culture war of the day, but your destiny forever. Paul summarizes this so well in the book of Ephesians, and I like the way the GNB says it:

This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world. Christ rules above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords, he has a title superior to all titles of authority in this world and in the next. (Eph 1:19-21)

God, who is the Creator of all things, kept his secret hidden through all the past ages, in order that at the present time, by means of the church, the angelic rulers and powers in the heavenly world might learn of his wisdom in all its different forms. (Eph 3:9-10)

Caesar was declared to be a god by the Romans, but Jesus was declared to be the true God by the power of God Himself! Caesar was not resurrected from the dead. This poem is for us, to encourage us when our minds are shaken and we are uncertain or in doubt. Just think, we are still proclaiming that Jesus *IS* Lord twenty centuries after this was written, and the angels are still watching!

As we let this message soak into us and we allow our own lives to be Gospel-shaped by the story of Jesus, we find we grow in wisdom and strength. We catch a vision of the assembly called *the Church of the living God*. We begin to see the gods of popular culture for what they are. They promise much but deliver little and they may even take away from us that which is most precious to us. The gods of this world are liars and cruel masters.

After pointing us to this majestic upward ideal Paul takes a sudden turn and warns us about men in the *Last Days*, the end of this age. *Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons...(4:1)* Paul sees this has already begun. Men who have worked with him and followed Jesus abandon what they know and what they previously professed as true. They turn from Jesus Christ and turn back to a different promise, like Israel did. It is not only Jesus as Lord they reject, but also God as Creator. Anyone who denies the value and the goodness of all creation, who rejects the beauty of marriage as part of God's plan, actually devalues the character of God. God said all of creation is good. The lying spirits deceive us and say it is not good, or not all of it. Demonic doctrine forbids marriage when God said after He created Adam and Eve *Be fruitful and multiply*. Marriage is good. In fact, after the man and the woman were joined together, God said *This is VERY good*. Now Paul sees and trusts the God who made the world in the first place is active in the world and remaking it through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We are called, "*not to abandon our humanity but to celebrate its rescue, its redemption and its remaking.*"³

We live in the midst of two cultures, two ways of living and we choose between two destinies. The way Jesus offers is a call to wisdom and life. The way of the *Last Days* is a call to folly and death. Paul is warning Timothy first of all. Everyone is vulnerable to taking what seems to be the easier way. Paul says these men have a *seared conscience*. They are blind in their arrogance and *devotion to the doctrines of demons*. (4:1) Remember how Paul urged Timothy early in the letter to *keep your faith and a clear conscience*. *Some people have not listened to their conscience and have made a shipwreck of their faith(1:18)?* I marvel at the connection Paul makes to violating our conscience and the weakening of our faith. Then Paul refers to Hymenaeus and Alexander, that he handed *them over to the power of Satan* in the hopes that the pain they would suffer *will teach them to stop their blasphemy*. Will they come to a place where they see what they are doing is wrong? Paul was hoping that they may still be teachable, to recover their conscience and turn back to faith in Christ. But what if they aren't teachable? Then the process continues. The conscience dies and there is no longer a right and a wrong. A person becomes an actual tool of Satan. He becomes a scoffer. A scoffer is the most dangerous kind of fool. He hates God and he hates those who love God. I think this is why Paul stops pursuing those who turn away. He takes the wise course of action:

Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. (Prov 9:7-9)

Paul will warn Timothy several times to avoid empty discussions and arguments over so called *knowledge*. And men of seared conscience? Avoid them too! They are the scoffers Proverbs warns us about.

We are in training. The goal of our training is not a great physique and physical strength, it is *godliness (4:7)*. Have you noticed that Paul says for the third time *The saying is trustworthy...* (4:9)? This could be translated as *Faithful is the Word*. We can focus in on these three simple sayings. The first is about Jesus: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...(1:15)*. This is what He has done in the *PAST* to save us and says *He is FOR US*. Next: The saying is trustworthy: *If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. (3:1)* This is the *PRESENT* and is about what Jesus wants to do *THROUGH US*, as He transforms us into the kind of leaders that will be the foundation and pillars of His Church in the world. Last of all we focus on the *FUTURE*: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (4:9-10)* This is where we started. We are on the path of wisdom if we are toiling and striving with our eye on the goal, which is *our hope set on the living God*. We do not have all the answers. Our thinking is faulty and we can't trust in it. But we can trust in Jesus because He is loving and wise. Like Lady Wisdom in the book of Proverbs, He is calling us to wisdom—

"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!" To him who lacks sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live, and walk in the way of insight."(Prov 9:4-6)

We are *the simple ones, lacking sense* but that's OK. If we are grateful to Him, and seek His will, we are teachable. And He is patient. We can trust Him!

Father, We live because of you. We can live with our flawed past because our forgiveness is total, in the present your grace continues and you give us gifts we can use to serve you by serving others, and our future is filled with hope because we will stand in the judgment with Jesus as our perfect advocate. We are so blessed by your love for us. It is more than we can comprehend. Walk with us and even as we struggle we will know your joy. Amen.

¹ Wright, Tom. *Paul: A Biography*. SPCK Publishing 2019 p.3

² Wright, Tom. *New Testament For Everyone. The Pastoral Epistles*. Westminster John Knox Press 2011 p.39

³ *Ibid.*, p.44