



## A Study of 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy

# 1st Timothy 3:14-16 The Mystery of Godliness...

I am reading from 1st Timothy chapter three, verses eight through thirteen. If you're using one of the pew Bibles, the passage is located on page 992...1st Timothy 3:14-16.

This is what God's Word says:

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 3:14**...I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

There is a catch phrase today that more or less permeates schools across America. No matter where the school is, no matter what kind of school it is...if you walk the halls of that school long enough you will eventually see this particular catch phrase plastered on the wall somewhere. It doesn't matter whether the school is secular, or whether it is parochial. It doesn't matter whether the school is public or private. It doesn't matter whether the school is a large multi-campus multi-million dollar juggernaut or an old-fashioned one room little red school house. If that school is open and has students and plays sports of any kind whatsoever, you will eventually see this phrase on a poster or on a long white butcher paper sign somewhere.

And what is the catch phrase?

The catch phrase is, **"Not in our House."**

Now what's funny about that is that you will see that sign on posters at games played in gigantic domed stadiums and you will also see it at the games of schools that are so small they have to be played in borrowed or rented gyms.

I mean it's pretty funny when you see a sign that says, **"Not in our House"** and the house the sign is referring to is not technically even that team's house.

Still, if you attend any kind of sports venues at all, you will eventually see that sign. I've even seen it when the game I was watching was played outside. I'm not sure why the sign didn't say, **"Not on our field"** or **"Not in our yard"** but it didn't. It said, **"Not in our house."**

Now the phrase itself means, **“You are not going to beat us on what we consider our home court, or field, or turf. This is our place and we don’t like being embarrassed at home so you ought to prepare to go ahead and lose quietly.”**

Now that phrase **“Not in our house”** interested me and so I thought I might do a bit of work to see if I could find where it first originated. I first thought quite naturally of Dikembe Mutombo. Mutombo is the massive 7’2” 260 pound former NBA basketball player who made a name for himself over the course of his career by blocking shots. He would block a shot and then turn to the shooter and wag his long skinny finger and say in his thick African accent, **“No! No! Not in my house.”** Mutombo once blocked twelve shots in one game. As far as I know it is the all-time record at Georgetown. Mutombo is so famous for the phrase **“No! No! Not in my house”** that the GEICO insurance company made a commercial in which it has Mutombo repeat the phrase over and over again. My favorite scene in the commercial is when a kid in a grocery store tries to throw a box of Cheerios into a shopping cart and Mutombo blocks the shot, destroying the box and sending Cheerios flying all over the place. He then wags his finger at the kid and says, **“No! No! Not in my house.”**

I love that but then again I have very little taste.

Mutombo is and always will be famous for the phrase. Only, it didn’t start with him. It didn’t even start with the Seattle Supersonics who had a team video based on the phrase go viral back in the early 90’s when they made it to the NBA playoffs. That was a full decade before Mutombo claimed the phrase **“Not in my house”** for his own. The Sonics video was a rap in which all the members of the team participated presumably to stir up both themselves and their fans. Still they didn’t

start the phrase...they picked it up somewhere else and so I continued to try to find the origin of the phrase.

And then you know it came to me. The first person to ever use the phrase, "**Not in my house**" was the Lord God himself. Of course, he didn't actually use those exact words, but he certainly made the same point. That is, he made the point that there were some things he had no intention of allowing to ever come to pass in his house.

There is a sense in which he did that with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. And there is a sense in which he did that with the whole world in the days of Noah. But instead, I want to restrict what I am saying to actual places of worship where God met with his people.

I wonder if I might get you to turn in your Bibles to Leviticus 9 for a moment to Leviticus 9:23.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Leviticus 9:23**...And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. <sup>24</sup> And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. <sup>ESV</sup> **Leviticus 10:1**...Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. <sup>2</sup> And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. <sup>3</sup> Then Moses said to Aaron, "**This is what the LORD has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'**" And Aaron held his peace. <sup>4</sup> And Moses called Mishael and Elzaphan, the sons of Uzziel the uncle of Aaron, and said to them, "**Come near; carry your brothers away from the front of the sanctuary and out of the camp.**" <sup>5</sup> So they came near and carried them in their coats out of the camp, as Moses had said.

You can see what I mean.

God didn't actually use the phrase "**Not in my house**" but he certainly made the same point. What he actually said was, "**Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.**" Still, I think you could say he was certainly making the point that there were some things he had no intention of allowing to occur in his presence...in his house. Nadab and Abihu got creative with their recipe for fire or incense...and God promptly killed them in response.

It seems terribly dramatic to us today for him to kill two men for changing up his prescribed order of worship. But that's precisely what happened. God was saying, "**No! No! Not in my house.**"

Later on, of course, the Lord killed Hophni and Phinehas for doing something equally stupid. Hophni and Phinehas were the two worthless of Eli, the High Priest of Israel. These two men were having immoral liaisons with prostitutes right inside the Tabernacle of God and as a result God killed them and then to top things off he killed their father as well because he had not tried to stop his sons in their wickedness. God killed them because they were doing the kind of things that he hated and they were doing them right under his nose. And his point in killing them was to say, "**Not in my house. You may sin elsewhere and survive but there are certain things that you simply are not going to do in my house and live.**"

But such things were not simply restricted to the Old Testament. Later on the New Testament, the Lord Jesus himself made much the same kind of statement.

He didn't kill anyone, of course, but he made a whip and cleared out the courtyard of the temple when he saw it being profaned. And he did that not just once but twice. Of course, he doesn't use the phrase, "**Not in my house**" but he gets pretty close to doing so when he says, "**Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade.**"

Certainly, the point he was making was "**No! No! Not in my house.**"

Now I bring that up because of the point Paul makes in the last three verses of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy chapter three.

Look at it with me...1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:14:

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 3:14**...I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> 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.

I hope you can remember for earlier talks that Paul had left Timothy there in Ephesus while he was on the way to Macedonia. He left him there because he had gotten some terrible reports about the church in Ephesus. False teachers had wormed their way into the church and were subverting the law and turning it into some sort of speculative philosophy and as a result Paul wanted Timothy to go into the church at Ephesus and take charge of the situation and to turn them out. That is, he wanted Timothy to get rid of them. He wanted Timothy to get rid of them so that the treasure of the gospel entrusted to his care might be preserved there in the church at Ephesus.

I guess from that perspective you could say that Timothy was facing a doctrinal fight there at Ephesus. But the actual truth is that doctrinal fights...theological battles...are almost never restricted to doctrine alone. Such fights almost always bleed over into the realm of ethics and morality. That is, they almost always bleed over into the life and practice of the church. I am almost certain that that had happened in Ephesus.

I say that because in the verses leading up to this particular passage Paul had already placed a good deal of emphasis on the behavior and attitudes of both the men and women at Ephesus. At the start of chapter two, Paul tells Timothy to have the men in the church lift up holy hands and to pray for all sorts of leaders in all sorts of places. And the question is why does Paul go there of all places? Why does he want them to focus on prayer rather than on the doctrinal errors being taught by the false teachers Timothy is supposed to get rid of?

He does that, I think, because false doctrine almost always leads to ungodliness.

You see the real issue at Ephesus seems to have been an unsated lust for power and supremacy. I think the problem in Ephesus was that the men of the church were turning inward...each man trying to mark off his own domain or territory...each man trying very much to become king of the hill. I think that's the implication drawn from the fact that the men at Ephesus were constantly engaged in arguments and fights and the like. Each man wanted his own praise. Look with me back to 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 2:8.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 2:8**...I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling;

You see what I mean.

It looks very much like Paul's solution...his antidote to the poison of Ephesian self-preoccupation was prayer for others...prayer that turned outward with the gospel. You see the church was not simply designed to be a repository of the truth. It is that. But it is more than that. It is designed to be a lighthouse shining outward to a world covered in darkness.

Unfortunately, it wasn't just the men at Ephesus who were preoccupied with themselves. In the last part of chapter two, we also saw that the women too were doing much the same kind of thing. So Paul through Timothy gives the women at Ephesus some very pointed instruction. He tells them to lay aside their desire to have authority over men...he tells them to lay aside their obsession with calling attention to themselves by means of their provocative dress or extravagant fashion. He tells them to place themselves in submission to men not because they are inferior but rather that there might be order in the advance of the gospel.

You see what I mean. Paul was very much concerned with the behavior of both the men and women in Ephesus.

And then in chapter three Paul lays out for Timothy and the Ephesians the best possible solution for drumming the false teachers out of Ephesus. Paul tells Timothy that the way to get rid of the false teachers is to appoint men of character to the offices of both overseer and deacon.

Now that fact that he spends a lot of time talking about character doesn't mean that Paul doesn't want overseers and deacons to know doctrine. He says quite

plainly overseers must know how to teach...which means they must first know the truth. And he says of deacons that they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience which means, of course, that they have to know a bit of doctrine.

But here's the thing. For Paul, knowing doctrine is not quite. Paul is not satisfied for them to know doctrine alone. He wants them to know doctrine *and* to be men of character. He wants men whose actions match the doctrine they proclaim. He wants men whose lives are reflections of biblical truth.

You see what I mean.

Paul has been very concerned up to now both with stopping the false teachers and with the behavior and actions of the saints there at Ephesus. And the reason he is concerned about both things is because in a real sense the two things go together. When the gospel is properly preached and rightly believed, it will produce a change in character. It will reflect the reality of a heart transformed by the gospel. The reason Paul is so concerned with behavior is because the heretical teaching of the false teachers is not just limited to bad doctrine. It is also marked off by scurrilous living.

And that's always the case.

Bad doctrine always leads to bad practice. Selfishness and self-centeredness and a preoccupation with one's self are a reflection of a heart that has yet to be conquered by the gospel.

That's why Paul makes the point that he makes in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3:14.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 3:14**...I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> 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.

You see Paul is telling Timothy that he hopes very much to join him soon there is Ephesus. But he is not quite sure that that will happen. We know that Paul's desire to join Timothy was quite real because he makes the statement not once but twice. He makes it here in chapter three and he makes it again in chapter 4.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Timothy 4:13**...Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

Again, Paul's point is that should he be delayed he wants Timothy to be about the task of teaching people in the church how they must behave.

Now Paul is writing specifically to Timothy. The pronoun Paul uses in verse fourteen is singular. He says he is writing to "**you**" and the "**you**" is a masculine singular pronoun which means he is directing his remarks to Timothy. Now that doesn't mean Timothy is to keep everything that Paul is sharing to himself. In fact, it means quite the opposite. Timothy is to take what Paul has written and to communicate it to the members of the church in Ephesus so they too will know how they are to act. But here's the thing, he is not just telling them how to act in a general sort of way. No, he is specifically telling them how they are to act as a part of the household of God.

And by that Paul is not just referring to how they ought to act when they are assembled in someone's home somewhere. He is not just talking about Sunday worship. Rather what Paul has in mind here is how they are to act as an integral

part of God's household. Which brings me back to my introduction...the behaviors that Paul has outlined earlier in Timothy and the things that he is yet to talk about in chapters four through six are directed both with putting out the false teachers and how the members of the church behave. There are some things they are to do and there are some things they are not to do...as in my house and not in my house.

Now why is it so important to Paul that the Ephesians behave a particular way? There are two reasons. They are members of God's household. That is they are servants in his house and must conduct themselves in a certain kind of way...think Nadab and Abihu and Hophni and Phinehas. In fact, Paul uses that little word  $\delta\epsilon\iota$  that I have mentioned a number of times in the last two lessons. It is a word that implies divine necessity. Paul is not simply saying that it would be nice if the Ephesians behaved in a certain kind of way. Rather he is saying that they must behave in a certain kind of way. You see the Ephesians are servants in a great household...and that household has a wonderfully dignified place because it is the dwelling place of the living God. That phrase the **"living God"** is used over and over again in the Old Testament to distinguish the God of Israel from the false dead idols of the surrounding nations.<sup>1</sup> He is not a God who is far removed or unconcerned about his people. Rather he is a God who lives in the midst of his people and he demands that his people live in his presence in a certain kind of way.

So that's the first reason that Paul wants Timothy to know how the Ephesians must live. He wants him to teach them and explain to them that they are a part of God's household and as a result must embrace a particular standard of behavior. They are members of God household which is his church and God himself is there in their midst.

Still, that's not the only reason Paul gives for wanting Timothy to make sure the Ephesians know how they ought to live. He gives a second reason near the end of verse fifteen, and that reason is quite practical. The church is a pillar and buttress of the truth. That is, the church at Ephesus is a pillar and buttress to hold up and support the truth. The Ephesians would have understood Paul's imagery quite well.

You see the city of Ephesus was home to one of the great seven wonders of the ancient world. That great ancient wonder was the Temple of Artemis...the Temple of Diana. The temple itself was 425 feet long and 225 feet wide and held up by 127 marble columns. That's four times bigger than the Parthenon. It required that many columns because the roof of the Temple of Artemis was constructed entirely of marble. The pillars or columns of the temple at Ephesus were massive. Each column was 60 feet tall and 36 of the 127 columns were intricately carved half way up.

One ancient writer put it this way:

I have seen the walls and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon, the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the mighty work of the high Pyramids and the tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade.<sup>2</sup>

The people at Ephesus would have known all about pillars and buttresses.

Paul's point is not that there are a lot of pillars at Ephesus. Rather, his point is that there is only one pillar at Ephesus...one pillar and buttress of the truth. There

are other pillars in other churches in other cities and towns but the church at Ephesus...the household of God at Ephesus is the one lone pillar and support of truth there. If that pillar falls...if that pillar fails to stand against heresy and the false teachers...if that pillar collapses because people in the church want only to exalt themselves...there will be no more place for truth at Ephesus.

Paul is giving Timothy instructions to make sure the people at Ephesus know how they must behave in order to guard the treasure of the gospel they have in their midst. They must do that and fend off the false teachers there or the truth of the gospel will simply cease to exist there at Ephesus.

And Paul drives his point home to Timothy by doing the strangest thing imaginable. He breaks into song. Look at verse 16.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...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.

You see verse 16 contains an ancient hymn. You can tell that because of the parallel structure of the phrases and because of the repetition of the preposition that is used in each of the phrases. You can't see it very well in English, but it is crystal clear in Greek. All of the verbs in Greek are passive verbs and they all have the exact same ending. All of the prepositions in Greek are the exact same preposition. The section has meter and rhythm and assonance. It's not quite a modern praise song...but it is definitely a song, or a hymn, or creed.

You can also tell that that is true because of that little phrase, **“we confess.”**

You see Paul is saying that the truth is the pillar and buttress of the truth and it has an actual truth to confess.

One very interesting thought, and this is not new with me, is that Paul may have purposely worded his introduction to this hymn using the words **“great indeed”** because of a personal experience he had in Ephesus. You may recall that in the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Acts that so many of the Ephesians were converted to Christianity that a silversmith in Ephesus named Demetrius tried to stir up the people of Ephesus against Paul because he feared the idol making business in the city was going to be completely ruined.

As a result, the Ephesians rioted and drug a couple of believers into the stadium there at Ephesus and shouted for over two hours, **“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”**<sup>3</sup> It was their way of saying, **“No! No! Not in our house.”**

I think Paul may have been trying to get Timothy and the Ephesians to remember that scene...so he used the same phrase. I think maybe he was saying, **“You know there are some things that are great...you know really great. I mean great indeed is the mystery of godliness.”**

Of course that raises the question as to what exactly Paul means by the phrase **“mystery of godliness.”**

When Paul uses the word **“mystery”** he doesn't mean it the same way we do. He doesn't mean that it is something that must be figured out. Rather he means it as

something that used to be completely unknown but has now been revealed. A lot of ancient religions used to claim to possess very important secret knowledge which could only be revealed to its initiates over time and at great expense. Paul uses the word “**mystery**” to refer to something no one knew until God kindly revealed it to all who will receive it.

Paul says great indeed is the mystery of godliness that God has now finally revealed and that mystery is the truth that the church at Ephesus, a pillar and buttress, is to hold up and placard to all the world.

So what is the mystery?

Well, it's not a what at all.

It is rather a who. It is the revelation of Jesus Christ and his great redemptive work in the gospel.

Now there are all kinds of theories as to how to best understand this little hymn. So scholars think it ought to be divided into three couplets focusing on the prepositional objects...flesh and Spirit, angels and nations, and world and glory (earth and heaven). Some scholars think it ought to be divided into two stanzas of three lines each with the first three lines focusing on what happened in our Lord's ministry on earth while the second three focus on what has happened since he has ascended into heaven.

Still, I think it is best to keep it simple and just to think of these six lines as being largely chronological. Let's take them one at a time.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...He was manifested in the flesh...

That means he was made incarnate. It is a reference to the fact that the Lord Jesus preexisted and descended in the incarnation to take a body to himself and become man. He lived a perfectly sinless life and through his words and actions modeled for the world the sinless beauty of God himself.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...*he was* vindicated by the Spirit,

That means that in the resurrection, the Holy Spirit raised him from the dead as a sign to everyone that his sacrifice on behalf of sinners was acceptable to God and that God has proved once and for all times that he is pleased with the Son.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...*he was* seen by angels,

I think this may be reference to extraordinary interest the angels took in his life, death, and resurrection. They were to see his birth. They tended to his care in life, and they were there to announce his resurrection and to marvel at his ascension.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...*he was* proclaimed among the nations...

His gospel was proclaimed to the Gentiles and they were admitted to his kingdom...to his great house and church. His name has been proclaimed in every nation and tribe in the world.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...*he was* believed on in the world,

Not only has he been proclaimed. He has actually been believed on. He came to his own and his own did not generally receive him but as many as did receive him to them he gave the power to become the sons of God.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1Timothy 3:16**...*he was* taken up in glory.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God and he will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.

The mystery of godliness is the Lord Jesus Christ himself and the revelation of God in the gospel. That is the truth we as the church hold up as the pillar and buttress of the truth. And because we do hold it up...we have an obligation to live a certain kind of way. We cannot be overly concerned with exalting ourselves. We must know how we are to behave and we must know why that matters. It matters because we are members of his household and because failing to do so will undermine the steady pillar and buttress of the truth with which we have been entrusted.

So when the temptation arises to exalt ourselves...

When the temptation arises to look like the world, to think like the world, to do what the world does...

When someone wants to fight or quarrel over things that only tend to exalt themselves and fail to hold up the gospel we must as the people of God...as the pillar and buttress of the truth say, **"No! No! Not in *his* house."**

Let's pray.

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<sup>1</sup> John R.W. Stott, *1 Timothy & Titus* (BST). (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>2</sup> Philon of Byzantium

<sup>3</sup> <sup>ESV</sup> **Ephesians 19:28**...When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" <sup>29</sup> So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. <sup>30</sup> But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. <sup>31</sup> And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. <sup>32</sup> Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. <sup>33</sup> Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. <sup>34</sup> But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"