

Churches That Raise the Roof

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 June 2024

Preacher: Stephen Ballingall

[0 : 0 0] going on. But we're going to turn to our Bibles now, and Stephen Ballingall is going to be preaching to us from a little passage right at the very heart of Paul's first letter to Timothy.

If you need one of the church Bibles, there's some around the sides, at the front, at the back, grab one and make use of it. It's page 992 in those Bibles, I think. We're just reading a few verses in 1 Timothy 3. During our expository ministry conferences last week, one of our speakers was speaking a little about 1 Timothy and noting that at the beginning and the end of the letter, there's a rather remarkable little description that the apostle makes of our Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter 1, verse 15, he talks about Christ Jesus coming into the world to save sinners and says of him that he is the king of kings. God is the king of kings, immortal, invisible, the only God, and to be him be glory forever and ever. And you'll notice at the end of the letter, at the end of chapter 6, says something very similar. This time not speaking about when Christ came into the world, but when he will return. It talks about the appearing of our Lord

Jesus Christ that he will display at the proper time. He who is the blessed and only sovereign, the king of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, who no one has ever seen or can see. Again, the immortal, invisible God. And to him be honored, and eternal dominion. And so right at the very heart of the letter are these verses that we're going to read from chapter 3, verses 14 to 16. And you'll see that at the heart of this passage, we have the invisible, the immortal God that made manifest in the flesh to be seen, to be heard, to be touched, to be known. Isn't that an extraordinary thing? So 1 Timothy 3 then at verse 14, Paul says, the apostle 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 as the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth.

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

[2 : 5 8] believed on in the world, taken up in glory. Amen. And may God bless to us his word.

Well, good evening, everyone. Please keep your Bibles open at 1 Timothy chapter 3, as we dig into just these couple of verses together this evening. A few years ago at the Venice Marathon, the race was all going to plan for the group of favourites, as they pulled away from the pack and formed their own leading group, establishing a lead a couple of minutes in front of everyone else.

But at the 16-mile mark, the police motorbike, which was guiding the way, took a turn down a windy path, and the leading pack followed. And this turned out to be a very wrong turn, with the runners ending up on a rather busy motorway, running a completely different race from the one they were meant to.

For several hundred metres, they were veering off course, and needed someone to drag them back on track, so that they could run the right race, and get to the right goal they were always aiming for.

However, becoming distracted from your task can have quite devastating consequences. You may end up running a different race entirely.

[4 : 24] And I think that leads us to ask, well, what is our key task? What is the key task of the church? And how can we avoid becoming distracted from that task?

Well, the key task of the church is nothing less than the salvation of the world. As we are commanded and empowered to take Christ's gospel to the ends of the earth.

Over all the world, Christ is building his church through his church. And we can avoid distraction, avoid taking wrong turns in that task, by just being what the Lord has made us to be.

Truly human. Like Christ, always reaching out with his gospel. As the church lives like Christ and reaches out with his gospel, we are fulfilling our purpose of saving the world, of holding out God's offer of gracious salvation to all who need it.

It's seen in all God's people and all their walks of life, living the gospel in their communities, and drawing them towards the place where the living God is made known. And for Timothy, this was something that he really needed to hear, because the church in Ephesus that he was responsible for was in danger of veering off course.

[5 : 46] Timothy was a distinguished gospel warrior who had seen battle, and he'd served alongside Paul in many different missions. He's someone who, Paul says in Philippians, he has no one quite like him.

And he'd proved himself to be a good and faithful servant. However, at the time of writing this letter, Timothy was engaged in battle, engaged in fighting off false teachers, as men had emerged from within the congregation who were causing people to doubt their faith.

It's a reminder, isn't it, that right from the start, even under the apostles, churches always had their issues to deal with. The church in Ephesus had become distracted by arguments over theological minutiae and a false kind of spirituality of what these teachers claimed was true godliness.

It involved a kind of asceticism of severe self-discipline and self-denial, rejecting the goodness of the created order. And Paul knew that this was a great danger to the church and to her mission.

They were at real risk of taking a wrong turn and running a different race entirely. It's into this situation that Paul wrote, and his main aim in writing to Timothy was to get this church, which was very much in danger of swerving from the truth, of going off course, turned around and back on the main road, moving forwards with the gospel.

[7 : 18] He wanted them to be embodying the gospel themselves and proclaiming it well under good and faithful leadership so that they might win the world around them. Not always focused on trying to convert other Christians to our own particular position on some issue, or distracted by internal arguments, but given a well-ordered platform so that they could press on with the important gospel work that Christ has for his church to do.

And this is a message that every true church of Christ needs to hear today, as we and every faithful church needs to know how to stay on the main road, how to keep on pressing on with their foot on the accelerator, always considering how we might grow the gospel.

We all need to know how to keep on ensuring we are serving Christ's mission and not our own. And it's into that situation that our passage this morning speaks so clearly, sorry, this evening speaks so clearly.

These verses are really at the heart of the letter as Paul shares his desire for the church. And in it we see the great purpose of the church, which is to grow in godliness by sharing Christ's gospel with the world and lift it up so that all might see and believe.

The church's agenda is set by Christ and his gospel as he uses his people to adorn and proclaim his gospel, which is the key to godliness and salvation.

[8 : 52] Well, let's look at our passage and we'll split these verses into just two halves. Firstly, seeing in verses 14 and 15, the living God seen through godly living.

The living God seen through godly living. As God's family, we are to live in such a way that it lifts up the truth of the gospel.

Paul wants the church to grow in godliness so that it's the kind of church which outsiders are attracted to. He says that he wants to come and visit Timothy in the church, but he knows that a delay is likely.

So he wants to share this key message so that the church might get back on track and keep on growing in godliness together. Well, what is this message? It's summed up in verse 15.

Paul writes, Paul wants the church in Ephesus to behave rightly in God's household.

[9 : 54] That is, the family that God has gathered together. That knowledge of how to behave is really shorthand for what Paul's written in the whole letter. That he wants the church to live in good order, to be led in the right manner, and with the right priorities, with evangelism, as its beating heart.

But why are they to behave this way? Well, it's because of what the church is. Paul says that they are to act this way because the church is to be, end of verse 15, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

This means that the church is to lift up the gospel so that all can see. Because in a building, the pillar holds up, and the buttress supports the pillar, giving it stability. They're not separate things with separate functions, but these work together to show how it holds up and supports the roof so that it might be seen.

If you picture a beautiful roof yourself, perhaps the most famous roof in the world in the Sistine Chapel, you would have utterly missed the point if you went there, visited it, took it in and said, wow, aren't these walls something?

Aren't the foundations amazing? Aren't the columns wonderful? It's just not the point. The columns are not there so that your eyes are drawn to them, but to the beautiful roof which it supports and lifts up, visibly proclaiming it to the world.

[11 : 19] And that roof we are to draw eyes to is the gospel message of how God saves sinners. Chapter 2, verses 4 and 5 make that connection clear as Paul describes the truth as the good news of Christ being made the ransom for all who would trust him and come to a knowledge of that truth.

This isn't speaking of just some general truth of upholding some sort of good order in society, although that's of course a secondary benefit of holding out the gospel and its implications for life.

It's one of the ways in which the church is called to be a blessing to the world we live in. But importantly, this verse is making the point that the church and the way it behaves is to display the truth, the gospel message to the outside world so that they will all see it and want to find out how they can have that kind of godliness for themselves.

So our task as the church is to, in the immortal words of the DJs every school disco I've ever been to said, raise the roof. Our task is to raise up the truth of the gospel so that Christ's salvation can be seen clearly.

And we raise the roof by living in such a way that it obviously points people to Christ. That's why Timothy is to know how to behave in the household of God.

[12 : 47] So that the gospel message is presented clearly and beautifully adorned by the good conduct of those who profess to love Christ. And that's really important for us to grasp, isn't it?

Because we can have all the right theology, but if we're not visibly living out the gospel day to day, then we aren't fulfilling our role as the pillar and buttress of truth, lifting up the glory of Christ's gospel for all, displaying what the gospel actually does to people as it transforms us into Christ's likeness.

And the implication of this truth is that we, as Christ's church, are to live in godliness, trusting him that it lifts up his gospel as it displays the gospel in our lives.

The conduct of the church impacts our gospel witness. And we do really need to take that seriously. We are the people who know the mystery of godliness, the way to the truth, so are to embody that truth in our day-to-day lives and particularly as we worship also.

And we know, don't we, just how significant a thing our living witness can be for better or for worse. Of how damaging it is for the church if instead of living the gospel, it is actively rejecting it.

[14 : 10] Not loving those who desperately need the gospel, but looking down on them, considering them less spiritual, less godly, or taking advantage of the flock as the wolves that some people prove to be, using their congregations for their own gain, feeding from them rather than feeding them.

Very sadly, we may know examples of churches and ministers like this whose behavior has brought the truth of the gospel crashing down, where the beautiful roof has collapsed in and is now lost amongst the rubble of sin and shame.

That's where the gospel is not lifted up, but is obscured and hidden amongst sin, sin which masquerades as spiritual godliness. Of course, Christ's church is not full of perfect people, and it's not to say that one tiny mark of failure on our part destroys the gospel witness.

The church would have died long ago if that were so, and let me tell you, any church that I'm part of would die today if that were so. But there is to be a consistency in godliness that displays gospel transformation in our faith, our families, our church particularly, which commends and supports the transformational message of the gospel.

Try with me to picture someone you know who is not yet a Christian, perhaps a friend or colleague of yours who you've had spiritual conversations with. They've been open to these conversations, you've been praying for them, they know that you're a Christian, and after a chat one day, they've agreed to come to church next Sunday morning.

[15 : 53] Now, before next Sunday morning comes and they've even crossed the threshold of the church building, met our church family and heard the word proclaimed, a powerful message has already been preached to them.

The way which you have loved them, shown good and faithful friendship to them and worked alongside them has lifted up the truth of the gospel, giving it a platform to shine from.

Because the gospel is not just information to be transmitted or communicated, but is to be seen to be believed. It is the living word of the living God made known through the ordinary godliness of his living people, which is how God has always worked.

And the wonderful thing is that the most powerful witness to Christ transforming work is seeing a group of sinners like us from all walks of life as we all are bow the knee before Christ in worship of him.

Because if we are behaving rightly, bowing before Christ with God's help, living in line with the gospel we love, then our conduct commends the gospel.

[17 : 09] It gives credibility to the gospel message and it's what gains the gospel a platform to be heard from. And if our church is full of people like that, well, surely that's the kind of church which your friends and loved ones will be glad to come to.

Because they know that it's a church that isn't just full of crackpots, but it's full of people who live in true godliness, who care about them, who have been transformed by the gospel of Christ.

That's what Paul was aiming for with this, that the church would lift up the gospel in her conduct, in both word and deed, so that many would come and see and find their saviour here.

The second point Paul makes in this passage is that the gospel saves through the mystery revealed. The gospel saves through the mystery revealed. Looking at verse 16. And here Paul is building on what he's already said and is saying that Christ himself and proclaiming Christ's gospel is the key to godliness.

The church holds and has that message and is not to keep it to itself, but rather we have been empowered by our Lord to declare that message of grace to the world, offering God's hand of mercy to all who would believe.

[18 : 28] For a church to be one of godliness, of real Christian maturity, they will have evangelism in their blood because the spirit of the saviour God lives in our hearts.

For the church is not mature where its heart has not been moved by the gospel, but where it has, it will naturally be reaching out to those in need, stretching out the hand of salvation to our city.

Paul writes that great, indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness. And as with Paul's other writings in the mystery of the gospel, the mystery is not some mystical, unknowable secret, but it's something long hidden and now quite plainly revealed.

And that mystery is a person. first word of the hymn in verse 16, he. And that's the first of two aspects of godliness we see here, that firstly, godliness is all about Christ, and secondly, that godliness is seen in a heart for evangelism.

So firstly, godliness is all about Christ. As his gospel is proclaimed and believed, he is the mystery of godliness, of how sinful men and women become holy.

[19 : 47] Because godliness is not an idea to be achieved, but a person. Our godliness, the way in which sinners like us can be made holy to God and cleansed, justified before him, is all found in the Lord Jesus coming down to earth and his gospel being proclaimed all throughout the world.

We need the man of heaven come down in the flesh to take sinful men and women up to glory with him. He took on our humanity like us and showed that we can be made like him if we love and trust him.

Part of the reason Paul says this is that the Ephesian church was being attacked by false teachers claiming that there is a superior kind of spirituality, a godliness that can only be achieved through something more than loving Jesus and being loved by him.

In this case, by actively denying yourself of things that God calls good and a general rejection of what makes human life flourish. That's what he talks about next in the first few verses of chapter 4, that for these false teachers to be truly growing in godliness, you have to reject good things in the created order, becoming deliberately different in artificial and manufactured ways, defining yourself by what you abstain from rather than what you are made for.

And that must have led to having a particularly bad reputation with the people of Ephesus of being those arrogant religious types who never enjoy themselves and disapprove when anyone else tries to have fun either.

[21 : 28] But, Paul says that there is nothing odd about true Christian godliness. After all, it was made known in Jesus manifested in the flesh.

He was and is the most godly man there has ever been. And Jesus wasn't an oddball. He didn't make the gospel look bizarre and strange, but he beautifully made his father known through his own wholesome humanity in his friendships, in his compassion, in his love for people, in his devotion to his heavenly father.

Christ was wonderfully human in his interactions and were reaching out to those who the religious spiritual types had written off long ago. His is the perfect evangelistic godliness that really acts as a pillar and buttress to the truth and his church is to follow suit.

We don't need to isolate ourselves from the world and lead some kind of monastic existence because that's the very opposite of what Christ did. He was always surrounded by people, eating with them, spending time with them, loving them, caring for them.

And Christ's church is to be filled with people who look like him, who live like him, and who embody real and true humanity like him. That's real godliness, real holiness, truly wholesome humanity.

[22 : 59] Because the human Jesus Christ is the beginning of our Christian godliness and he is also its end, its goal. He is the one who sets the pace for us.

He's like the older brother who you're always trying to catch up with, who sets the standard of godly humanity, yet he doesn't tire of us when we struggle. But so lovingly and tenderly, he encourages and enables us to keep on going with him, to point us towards the goal, doing his work of proclaiming the true godliness of restored human beauty that he has won to the nations and which his church is to embody.

And that's why the second aspect of godliness we'll see is that it's seen in a heart for evangelism. That's what this hymn which Paul quotes is really all about. When we come to these six lines of the hymn, there are lots of different takes.

Many academics and commentators spend copious amounts of time debating the exact formulation of this. However, all these debates can sometimes miss the point of why Paul includes this hymn.

And it's really quite straightforward. He brings in this hymn, probably sung by many of the churches at the time. There may have been a first century version of the Gettys floating around. If you can imagine hearing those lines with a Celtic lilt, we'll never know.

[24 : 24] But Paul uses this hymn to reinforce the point he's making. He's using this hymn to show that the gospel of Christ is how we become holy, truly whole again.

How sinners are made righteous in Christ. I would split these six lines into two halves, focusing first on Christ's ascension, so his incarnation and then his ascension.

That seems to me to be the plain reading of it, partly because it mirrors the pattern that the believer is also to take, ending with being taken to glory with Christ in heaven. But the key here is that Christ has come down to earth, become one of us, human.

He fulfilled his work of redemption, witnessed to and vindicated by heaven itself, and Christ is continuing that work of redemption through his people today.

He's saying that Christ is building his church through his church, through our humanity that Christ has redeemed. That's why it's our task to be declaring boldly the mystery of godliness for all people, to proclaim Christ among the nations so that he is believed on in the world and to be taken up in glory with him and made like him, sharing his truly holy humanity.

[25 : 44] That is the charge of every church of Christ. We are saved by that gospel. And to always reach out with that gospel. We never move past it.

Real godliness and holiness is not seen in arguing over the trivial, incidental aspects of theology or creating a false sense of holiness or abstaining from things that God has called good.

That false godliness is unholy, unwholesome and utterly un-Christlike. And it's one of the great dangers of the church to become distracted from our task, to lose focus, not keeping our eyes on the road where Christ wants us to be.

And that's a challenge perhaps especially for those like, well, me and I'm sure all of us who do think that theology is important and that holiness does matter because it does.

it's a real trick of the devil to use our strengths to cause us to go off course by making us imbalanced and drive us actually to become sidetracked into being taken up with anything but the most important thing of reaching out with Christ's gospel to the world.

[27 : 00] But real godliness is not some advanced form of unachievable spirituality. spirituality. It's found in living like Christ and reaching out with his gospel.

This is our task as Christ's church and as we joyfully practice and preach that gospel we find our true calling. We are to proclaim Christ and his gospel message among the nations so that he will be believed on in the world so that many would come to him in faith bowing the knee to Christ as their Lord and Savior the only hope they have of salvation when Christ returns in glory.

By God's grace we as a church have already had a real impact for good in Glasgow by doing just that and I thank God for that and please keep on praying for those who have professed faith recently at the life course.

And let me encourage you brothers and sisters that if we are to have a real and growing impact in this whole city and beyond if we are to win Glasgow for Christ if we are to have disciples join us an ever greater number who glorify God with us then we don't need some new secret to church growth.

There is no secret ingredient no hidden knowledge no special wisdom no. You know the mystery of godliness.

[28 : 26] you just need to continue to live out the gospel of Christ and proclaim that gospel to all around more and more from your lips and in your life to all who are willing to hear him.

And you can because well it's what Christ has made us for and it is what our city needs. Glasgow needs people like us.

it is the only hope of our friends family members neighbours colleagues and many others who do not know Christ. It's the way in which the Lord has ordained to win the world.

He made us his church a pillar and buttress of the truth of the gospel so that others might see and glorify God coming to worship Christ as their Lord as they witness his people us living the gospel displaying what humanity is meant to be and can be in Christ.

Holding up the truth that men and women are designed to flourish and that we do flourish in the church in all the things that really matter in this life as we live for Christ and love one another.

[29 : 38] That's why the church is the place and the only place where salvation is found. That's why the church is the only hope of Glasgow and beyond.

And that salvation will be found right here among us right here in Christ's church if we keep one another absolutely clear and undistracted from our true identity and true calling.

That is God's great plan to save the world and we as his church have the great privilege of being his heralds to a world which so desperately needs salvation because to us he has revealed the mystery of godliness so that it need not be a mystery anymore to all those we share our life with as his church.

Well let's pray. our father god we praise you for the great grace of your gospel that your son took on flesh and suffered that we may have life in him we ask that tonight you would warm our hearts with the wonderful truth of your gospel the gospel of the living god may know and help us to adorn it in both word and deed we ask this in Jesus name and for his sake amen