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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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## **The Great Mystery of Godliness**

### **1 Timothy 3:16**

Christmas time is here, and with it a struggle to keep the true meaning and significance of Christmas central

Many of our feelings and images of Christmas come from culture, not from Scripture

It is Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" that made 19<sup>th</sup> century England a major cultural tributary in our collective sense of the holiday... the streets of London, lit by gas lanterns... Ebenezer Scrooge stalking and muttering, the ghosts of Christmas past and present filling our senses with sights and sounds from that era of history—figgy pudding, roast goose, top hats, and carolers out in the crowded streets of London

Or it is the famous poem by Clement Clarke Moore, written in 1822... " 'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse..."

Or it is Thomas Nast's famous depiction of Santa Claus as a heavy-set, bearded man with a big sack on his back loaded with toys, a cartoon which first appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1862 at the height of the Civil War

It is traditions like the Christmas tree, and mistletoe, and the Nutcracker Suite, and black and white movies like "The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street" and "It's a Wonderful Life", and non-spiritual seasonal songs like "Silver Bells", "Let It Snow", "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, jack frost nipping at your nose..."... and all of them contribute to the overwhelming cultural baggage we all carry with us throughout every December, every year of our lives

And none of this touches the greatest distraction of all... the overwhelming drive toward materialism, toward lavish Christmas shopping sprees, that our whole consumer-driven economy relies on so much that Christmas music and decoration begin earlier and earlier every year—now immediately after Halloween in some places!! It is the relentless advertising assault on the senses, playing to our yearning for material possessions

Now I'm not saying these things are all evil, or all of the devil... but they can serve as a massive distraction to the true significance, the joyful news of the birth of Christ:

***Luke 2:10-11 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.***

This is the point!! This is the joy!! This is the good news of great joy!!

The Apostle Paul knew this very well when so long ago he penned the words of our focus this morning:

***1 Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.***

Context:

- Paul is writing to Timothy, his young protégé, to instruct him in ministry in the local church
- Paul is very concerned about the church Timothy is pasturing... the church in Ephesus; he is especially concerned about false teachers who pervert the gospel
- In chapter 3, he establishes the character and ministry of elders and deacons; elders are especially entrusted with
- The summation is found in the words preceding this morning's text:

***1 Timothy 3:14-15 Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, <sup>15</sup> if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth.***

- He wants Timothy to know how God wants him personally to conduct himself as a minister of the gospel—watching his life and his doctrine closely so that he can save both himself and his hearers
- He wants Timothy to instruct the people of God how they should conduct themselves as members of the church, which he calls “God’s household”
- Even more strikingly, he wants Timothy to uphold with great power before the people of God what the purpose and role of the church is: to be the PILLAR and FOUNDATION of the TRUTH
- Though we rightly say that the church is PEOPLE not a BUILDING, yet here Paul uses architectural imagery:
  - “the PILLAR” of the truth: that which upholds truth in the world, adorns it, holds truth up for all to see: something strong yet elegant, lofty yet stable and grounded

- the “FOUNDATION” of the truth: that which supports and grounds the truth in this sin-soaked and confused world... something unchanging, immovable
- in our “postmodern” world, we are deeply confused on this very issue... skeptical about whether there can be anything like transcendent truth in the spiritual realm
- postmodernism = the idea that, if there is such a thing as absolute truth, it is impossible for anyone to know it for certain
- like Pontius Pilate, the postmodern sits in judgment on Jesus Christ and says “What is truth?”, then gets up and walks away, implying there is no answer possible
  - of course, postmodern physicists still believe in the unfolding and immutable laws of physics by which they make their living
  - postmodern architects still understand that engineering standards must be upheld or the building will collapse
  - postmodern surgeons still know where the liver is and the lungs and kidneys, and the difference between them
- it is the church’s marvelous privilege in this morass of confusion to be rock-solid and immovable on the truth, like a solid foundation; it is the church’s sweet responsibility to soar high and beautiful with the truth
- and what is the truth? The same person that was standing in front of Pilate, the same one who said “I am the way and the truth and the life...”
- The apostle Paul makes it clear:

***1 Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.***

The truth is Jesus CHRIST, the only begotten Son of God

And in this one verse we have multiple statements about Him:

First: it calls the doctrine of Christ, the mystery of godliness, and says the mystery is great

Second: it says that God appeared in a body

Third: it says He was vindicated by the Spirit

Fourth: it says He was seen by angels

Fifth: it says He was preached among the nations

Sixth: it says He was believed on in the world

Seventh: that He was taken up in glory

These truths are the center of Christmas, and they are worth our time today

## I. The Doctrine of Christ: The Great Mystery of Godliness

### A. Beyond All Controversy

1. Satan has attacked the doctrine of the incarnation with fanatical persistence
2. From the very beginning, Christ's claim to deity was what got Him killed
3. John tells us it is the focus of Satan's attack on the church
4. Throughout the early centuries of the church, the doctrine of the deity and humanity of Christ was the central battleground
  - a. Socinianism: 190 A.D. taught that Jesus was a mere man at birth, but became the Son of God at His baptism... also called adoptionism
  - b. Modalism: 3<sup>rd</sup> century... that God appears sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Holy Spirit... but they are not different persons
  - c. Arianism: 4<sup>th</sup> century ... that Jesus was God's first created being, a god (with a little "g", but not the Creator God)... a false teaching held today by Jehovah's Witnesses

To refute this error, God raised up the courageous man Athanasius, who stood against the whole world and won them over... resulting eventually in the Nicene Creed

**We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.**

**And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate.**

- d. Eutychianism, 5<sup>th</sup> century... that Jesus had one nature (the divine nature) clad in a human body, but no truly human nature

Some have been extremely precise about the way the human and divine natures of Christ relate to each other... the so-called “hypostatic union”

- 5. So there has been a river of controversy about the doctrine of the incarnation... the deity and humanity of Christ
- 6. But here, Paul says something that is BEYOND ALL CONTROVERSY... a statement no true believer can dispute:
- 7. the mystery of godliness—the mystery of the doctrine of Christ—is GREAT

## B. The Mystery

- 1. mystery does not mean something to be solved: like an Agatha Christie novel or a Sherlock Holmes case...
  - a. Sherlock Holmes was the very embodiment of the modern scientific method
  - b. He specialized in careful observation of physical details which gave him amazing insights into the circumstances that affected a person or a case

By a man's finger-nails, by his coat-sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser-knees, by the calluses of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt-cuffs - by each of these things a man's profession or trade is plainly revealed

Take for example this conversation between Holmes and his friend, Dr. Watson in the case called “The Sign of the Four”:

Holmes said to Watson:

“my observation shows me that you have been to the Wigmore Street Post-Office this morning, but deduction lets me know that when there you dispatched a telegram.”

"Right!" said Watson. "Right on both points! But I confess that I don't see how you arrived at it. It was a sudden impulse upon my part, and I have mentioned it to no one."

"It is simplicity itself," Holmes remarked, chuckling at Watson's surprise,--"so absurdly simple that an explanation is superfluous; and yet it may serve to define the limits of observation and of deduction. Observation tells me that you have a little reddish mould adhering to your instep. Just opposite the Seymour Street Office they have taken up the pavement and thrown up some earth which lies in such a way that it is difficult to avoid treading in it in entering. The earth is of this peculiar reddish tint which is found, as far as I know, nowhere else in the neighborhood. So much is observation. The rest is deduction."

The key to a Sherlock Holmes cases was careful observation, followed by logical deduction from all available data

Thus a “mystery” becomes no mystery at all

- c. But this is impossible when it comes to “the mystery of godliness”... that is, the mystery of the incarnation of Christ, the Son of God

***Luke 17:20-21 Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, <sup>21</sup> nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,'***

God purposely conceals this truth from the human empirical method... not by science does it come

***1 Corinthians 1:21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.***

- d. But neither is this “mystery” what modern new-age religious folks or postmodern seekers of religious mystery think it is... they speak often of “mysteries”... postmodern pastors intentionally seek to leave their hearers with more questions than answers, more sense of mystery than a sense of truth;
- e. they are merely fitting into a long line of “mystery religions” in which the uninitiated, the novices, seek for higher knowledge, to become enlightened in an ever-ascending, soaring progression of mysteries
- f. there were such mystery religions in Ephesus... Gnosticism, which fully developed later, delighted in these spiritual mysteries, as though they were locked doors, and only those with the key of knowledge could pass through and keep making progress
- g. Paul’s meaning of mystery is something else: it is a truth that can be known, it is rational, it can be understood, but it can never be worked out by logic or deduction, and its full implications can never be fully understood
- h. It is rational truth known only by revelation from Almighty God... and God DOES reveal that knowledge... but even when you have it, you still have to grow in understanding it fully

***Matthew 16:15-17 But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.***

God the Father revealed the truth of the incarnation to Peter... but moments later, Peter was telling Jesus He was wrong about the fact that He would die on a cross...

How can God be wrong?? Peter knew the doctrine of the incarnation because it was revealed to him by God, but he did not fully understand... nor would he the rest of his life

But the mystery was knowable and rational

### C. The Mystery of Godliness

1. Clearly, since everything in the list refers to the life of Jesus Christ, the word “godliness” must pertain to Him
2. Godliness can mean a godly lifestyle... a godly man who behaves in a righteous manner in the physical world
3. thus the “mystery of godliness” would simply refer to the godliness of Christ’s perfect life in the body
4. but the Greek word can also mean “religion”... as though he is referring to our Christian religion, our Christian faith: the mystery of it

### D. The Great Mystery of Godliness

1. he says **“Beyond all controversy the mystery of godliness is GREAT...”**
2. this is a great mystery... really an infinite one
3. great not because it would take a great genius to figure it out... we have already seen that’s not what the mystery is
4. no, it’s a great mystery because the person of Christ is great
  - a. Jesus is God in the flesh... that is a great, an infinite mystery
  - b. Jesus perfectly reflects the glory of His Father... that is a great mystery
  - c. Jesus came to give us a great salvation by faith in His blood... that is a great mystery
5. this is the greatest matter in history... the birth of the Son of God to a human woman

## II. Six Aspects of the Great Mystery of Christ

***Vs. 16 He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.***

### A. He Appeared in a Body

1. text issue: KJV follows later Greek Manuscript that puts the Greek word “theos” in this place, reading

***“God appeared in a body...”***

2. that the verse clearly refers to Jesus Christ cannot be refuted... the whole flow of the verse is tracking the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension of Christ and the progress of the Gospel in His name
3. it begins with “He appeared in a body”... there is nothing remarkable or mysterious about that unless He is God... and all the NT clearly teaches that truth
4. for the NIV, ESV, NAS and other versions to substitute the word “he” does not mean we are denying the incarnation... not at all; that is precisely what this verse is teaching; it’s just that we don’t think the original text said “God” but merely “He appeared in a body”
5. God appeared in a body!!!
6. the Greek word translated “Appeared” does not mean to create or bring into existence, but rather “to make visible”... God was made visible in a human body
7. this verse assumes Christ’s pre-existence... he CHOSE to come into the world for a purpose:

***John 8:58 Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"***

***John 18:37 You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.***

8. Jesus took on a human body... a real human body, with blood, and hair, and tears, and muscles and fingernails... the exact same kind of body we have
9. Many cults in the world DENY this truth

***2 John 1:7 Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.***

- a. Islam denies that God became flesh... they cannot conceive of this
- b. The Mormons deny the deity of Christ... they say he was a created being, Lucifer’s brother
- c. Jehovah’s witnesses deny the deity of Christ... they also say he was a created being, not Jehovah God

B. Was Vindicated by the Spirit

1. Vindicated means to “justify” or to “declare righteous”...
2. Jesus is, without question, the most reviled and slandered man in the history of the world

***Luke 2:34-35 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, <sup>35</sup> so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.***

3. Amazing how gracious Jesus is in dealing with people’s blasphemies against Him!!

***Matthew 12:31 And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men***

***Matthew 12:32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven***

4. The virgin birth by his mother opened her up to the charge of sexual immorality and the charge that Jesus was an illegitimate son
5. The Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus by descending like a dove and remaining on Him at His baptism
6. The Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus by driving Him into the desert to be tempted by the devil, then empowering Jesus to resist in perfect holiness
7. The Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus by empowering Him to do great miracles
8. But the greatest vindication of all was His resurrection from the dead
  - a. The claims of Christ to deity throughout his life were brutally offensive to His enemies
  - b. While he was dying, they mocked Him bitterly
  - c. But the Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus by raising Him from the dead

***Romans 1:4 who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.***

9. And the Holy Spirit vindicated Jesus by coming in power on the day of Pentecost and moving the apostles to preach boldly in Jesus’ name:

***Acts 2:1-4 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.***

***Acts 2:36 Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."***

The culmination of Peter's Pentecost sermon:

***Acts 2:37-38 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."***

### C. Was Seen by Angels

1. Angels are created spiritual beings... they are not omniscient and needed to learn the gospel as much as we did

***1 Peter 1:12 Even angels long to look into these things.***

2. Angels are constantly watching human beings... watching silently, watching in the heavenly realms
3. especially they were watching Christ
4. Angels were watching as Jesus was born... the angel appeared in glory to the shepherds to announce the birth of Christ; a great company of angels appeared, praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest..."
5. Angels were watching over the baby Jesus and his parents, Joseph and Mary, when Herod was trying to kill the newborn
6. Angels ministered to Jesus after the forty day fast in the wilderness
7. Angels ministered to Jesus as he sweat great drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane
8. Angels were watching Jesus as He poured out His blood on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of human beings... they watched in amazement as God the Father poured out wrath on His only Begotten Son as our substitute, they watched as Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" They watched as Jesus said, "It is finished. Father into your hands, I commit my spirit." They watched silently as Jesus breathed His last and died.
9. Angels watched as the Holy Spirit raised Jesus from the dead on the third day... angels moved the stone, testified to the women and the apostles who came to the empty tomb...
10. Finally angels were there when Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives in Acts 1

11. ANGELS SAW IT ALL! He was seen by angels

D. Was Preached Among the Nations

1. the mystery of godliness is great... that Jesus entrusted the advance of His Kingdom through the nations of the world to the foolishness of preaching
2. this is one of the ways that the Spirit has vindicated Jesus...

***Acts 1:8 you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

3. amazing that Jews were sent forth into the Gentile world with this foolish message: God became a real man, died on the cross for sins, was raised from the dead...
4. no other religion in the world has done this... entrusted its advance to preaching
  - a. Buddhism did not advance by preaching
  - b. Hindusim did not advance by preaching
  - c. Judaism advanced by the example of the Jews in the diaspora, but they did not seek to win converts by preaching
  - d. Islam advanced by the sharp edge of the scimitar, not by preaching
5. Jesus' name was proclaimed to the ends of the earth... to every nation on earth

***Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.***

E. Was Believed on in the World

1. Even more amazing, more mysterious... that the preaching of this foolish message of a dead God on the cross, raised on the third day would actually be EFFECTIVE!!!
2. the cultured arrogant rich wise powerful men of every nation naturally SNEERED at this message

***Acts 17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered***

3. But God ordained something better for His elect from every nation: that this message of an incarnate God, a sinless miraculous life, an atoning death, a physical resurrection would be their only hope of eternal life

***Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.***

4. The great mystery of godliness is that Jesus was BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD
5. That powerful Roman centurions, Praetorian Guards, even (perhaps) emperors themselves would see in a Jewish carpenter the King of the universe and bow the knee to Jesus
6. That ruthless barbarian tribes from Germania and the distant north—even violent Norsemen, ruthless Vikings—would lay down their warlike ways and trust in the Prince of Peace
7. That men and women in Japan and China would see that Jesus is the Savior of the world, and reject the argument that He is a pollutant from the corrupt West
8. That cannibals in Irian Jaya would give up their idolatry and wickedness and become Christians
9. That atheist Marxist professors, that Maoist terrorists, that genocidal African warlords, that suicidal heroin addicts, that forsaken starving orphans, that bored alcoholic CEOs, that former Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, animists and others have actually turned to Christ and believed in him in this world

#### F. Was Taken Up in Glory

***Acts 1:9-11 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. <sup>10</sup> They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. <sup>11</sup> "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."***

1. taken up physically
2. ascended into heaven, He now sits at the right hand of Almighty God in heavenly glory

### III. Application: Diving Joyfully into the Mystery

#### A. This is the Mystery of Christmas

1. the glory of Christ's incarnation
2. the mystery of the gospel message
3. dive into it

4. meditate on it... allow your mind to stretch around each of the phrases Paul gives us here

5. a six-fold hymn of glory

#### B. Stand on these Truths

1. the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth

2. the center of the truth the church has for the world is Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God

3. proclaim these to your family, neighbors, friends

#### C. Purify Your Christmas

1. Traditions tend to grow up and obscure the truth

2. Don't let the traditions of Christmas cover up the message of Christ

3. Simplify, preach to yourself and your family... read the Scriptures, pray, talk about these six things

#### D. Final Story: A Church Loses its Message, and Its Soul

John MacArthur:

“There once was an old church in England. A sign on the front of the church building read, “We preach Christ crucified.” After a time, ivy grew up and obscured the last word. The motto now read, “We preach Christ.” The ivy grew some more, and the motto read, “We preach.” Finally, ivy covered the entire sign, and the church died. Such is the fate of any church that fails to carry out its mission in the world.

And what is that mission? To be the pillar and foundation of the truth, and Jesus is the truth:

***He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.***