Great Is the Mystery of Godliness: The Respect and Admiration That Make Us Live as Jesus Lived

Let us consider a mystery that Scripture calls great: the mystery of godliness. To enter into a mystery, we must first know what it is about. What, in fact, is godliness? What do we mean when we say that someone is a godly person?

This word seems a religious one, taken from the language of the church, and we hardly hear it any more in the modern, civilised world. It is very rarely used, and we can understand why. What it means to be first, to be a champion, to be the best or the most outstanding is clear to everyone, and these words are heard everywhere. But how many of us ever heard a teacher at school say, "Be godly, children"?

Yet, whatever we know or do not know about this word, the truth that God speaks remains: great is the mystery of godliness.

The apostle Paul writes to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:15-16: “But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.”

Scripture also speaks in another place of a great mystery, and the two can be set side by side, so that we see why these mysteries are great. In Ephesians 5:29-30, Paul writes: "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." And in verse 32 he adds: "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church."

We will not dwell now on the mystery of Christ and the Church, but on the other one: "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness."

Before we define godliness, let us pause at Hebrews, chapter 5. The Lord Jesus is our example, and the Word of God tells us that we too must live as He lived. That is why we first ask: was the Lord Jesus godly? If He was, then we too must be godly and enter into this mystery.

In Hebrews 5:7-9 we read: "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard for his godly fear; though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him."

The Lord Jesus was heard because of His godly fear, His godliness. How then shall we be heard? Must we not be godly too?

Some will say that to be godly means to be pious or devout. The dictionary does indeed say something like that: to be devout, religious, scrupulous in matters of religion. But it is rather hard to understand how the Lord Jesus would have been pious and devout in that sense. And how could the people of the world know what God means, when He Himself calls godliness a mystery? That is precisely why no one speaks of it: it is a mystery and something very rarely found.

The people to whom Paul was writing knew this word well. In 1 Timothy 4:7, he tells Timothy: "But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness." We know that we must seek the Kingdom of God, and in 2 Timothy 2, Paul urges Timothy to follow righteousness with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Here, however, he tells him: exercise yourself unto godliness.

The Word of God begins to make clear to us what godliness means in 1 Timothy 5:4: “But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God.”

So godliness is shown towards those of our own household: towards parents, perhaps towards older brothers and sisters. These children must "learn", that is, they must be taught to be godly. The Lord Jesus was godly, and here Scripture speaks again of godliness, here called piety, but not towards God.

When we hear the word "godliness", we think of being pious, devout, of something to do with religion and religious things. Paul, however, asks these children to be godly towards those of their own household. So godliness has nothing to do with religion. To live godly is a mystery.

In 2 Timothy 3:5, the Word of God speaks of people "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." They have a form of godliness towards God, but in reality they deny His power. Let us try, then, to understand what godliness is, not only according to a dictionary definition, although we will give such a definition as well.

The Word of God speaks to us a great deal about godliness and tells us that we must have it, because without it we shall not see God. Before the definition, let us linger a little over the text, so that we may understand more deeply what He wants to tell us. In 1 Timothy 6:1-2, Paul writes: "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit. These things teach and exhort."

The apostle continues in verses 3-5 with a warning: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of

corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself."

Godliness Is the Opposite of Pride

When we read, we must understand what we read, and this is our problem. If we do not know what godliness is, we read without understanding. The Word of God asks us to hold to the doctrine which is according to godliness, to train ourselves to be godly. The first two verses of 1 Timothy 6 show us something of what godliness means: servants are to count their masters worthy of all honour, and those who have believing masters are not to despise them.

These latter must also count their masters worthy of all honour. So let them take care that they do not, because the master is a believer and kind to them, fall into the other extreme and despise him, saying: "Never mind, he's kind and gives me work; I'll dodge it, hide away and not do any work." That is how we fall into the other sickness. Of the one who does not hold to the doctrine which is according to godliness, Paul says that "he is proud". The godly person is not full of pride, but quite the opposite: godliness is the opposite of pride. Was the Lord Jesus full of pride? Not at all.

Respect and Admiration

Yet it does not all come down to knowing the definition. Anyone who has a dictionary at home can discover this little secret. But what good is it if they do discover it? We know much of the Word of God, and yet we can be like those who have eyes and ears, but do not see, do not hear and do not understand. It is not enough to hear the definition of godliness. As it is written in Hebrews 5:7, the Lord Jesus was heard by God because of His godly fear.

The dictionary says that godliness is respect and admiration towards someone who is above you. But the dictionary does not speak as the Bible does, only in broad terms, and people today no longer know what it means to respect and admire someone. We, however, know what it means to admire and respect God: it means to keep His Word. The doctrine which is according to godliness is the teaching that leads to admiration and respect towards the one who is greater. Children must learn to be godly first towards those of their own household, that is, to respect them, to count them worthy of all honour and to admire them.

In 2 Timothy 3:1-4, Paul describes the people of the last days: "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God."

Let us take note of the words "unthankful, unholy", that is, without godliness. To make it clearer, we can understand them like this: unthankful, without respect and without admiration. When we are unthankful towards our parents, we neither respect them nor admire them. Unthankfulness is the opposite of godliness. In verse 5, Paul goes on to speak of people "having a

form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away."

We are living in difficult times today, and people are lovers of their own selves. We can think of the visible church today, the one we see with our eyes. The devil has done his work: he has scattered people, so that each one loves only himself. Gatherings have turned into gatherings of chairs, instead of having life and a body in them. Everyone says: "I have my chair, I put it here, in the back row; I have my place, I don't care about anyone, I care only about myself. I hear the Word, I like it, the sermon is good, I go home and I feel fine." We have become people who are lovers of their own selves, who have only a form of godliness.

What does it mean to have only a form of godliness? Let us take as an example the hymn "I would be like You, Jesus". When we sing it, we show a form of godliness: we say that we admire and respect the Lord Jesus so much that we would like to be like Him.

But it may be only a form of godliness, only a song. When hymn 307 is announced, everyone sings it. But how many of us have the godliness on account of which God hears us? The Lord Jesus was heard because of His godliness, that is, because of His respect and admiration for the heavenly Father.

Doing exactly as the Father does

How can we understand the godliness of the Lord Jesus? In John 5:19, He says: "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise." The Lord Jesus does what He sees the Father doing, and He does it exactly as the Father does. This is not a form of godliness, but true godliness: complete respect and complete admiration.

Think of a child so godly towards his father that he does everything his father does. Do we still see such a thing today? Do children still do exactly what their parents do? When a child admires his parents, he wants to follow them in everything, and such a child is godly. It is a beautiful thing to see a child who does everything his father does. We are not speaking here of wayward parents, but of parents who know, at least to some extent, the will of God.

How many of us have only a form of godliness? How many of us could say: "I want to do everything the Lord Jesus did"? The Lord Jesus never kept a single birthday. How many of us admire and respect Him so much that we do as He did? How many people keep their birthdays today? We all know the situation in evangelical circles.

Of such people Scripture says that they have a form of godliness, but deny its power. What does it mean to deny its power? With their mouths, these people deny nothing; rather, they say: "Yes, God is great, God does all things." But when God says to us, "Go and do", we answer Him, "I will not go." Are we godly when we say to Him, "I will not go"? No. We are godly when we do.

Godliness is an impulse within us that comes from admiring and respecting Him so much. So seek to be godly and hold fast to the doctrine which is according to godliness. Whoever has only a form of godliness does not hold fast to this doctrine. May God keep us from such a form of

godliness.

All will be persecuted

Also in 2 Timothy 3 we find a strange thing, which has happened to me too, praise God! I am glad that it happened to me, and may God help you so that it happens to you as well. Verse 12 says: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."

What does it mean to live godly in Christ? It means obedience: "I do nothing of myself. I do everything the Lord Jesus has told me to do, and I want to do exactly what I see that He did." But why should we be persecuted for that? And who will be persecuted? Not some, but all who desire to live godly in Christ.

Let us see what happened to the Lord Jesus when He lived godly towards the heavenly Father. He obeyed Him exactly and kept His Word. In John 7:7, the Lord Jesus says: "The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil."

What will people see in us when we live godly in Christ? They will say: "This man goes too far. He is a legalist. He has taken the Word of God to the extreme, to the point of absurdity. No one can fulfil the Word of God like that." But the Lord Jesus says to His brothers: "The world cannot hate you." The world does not hate us or persecute us when we do not live godly in Christ Jesus, when we do not live in complete obedience. Complete obedience shows that there is a godly person there.

Without admiration there is no godliness

Great is the mystery of godliness. Why is it great, and why can people not attain it? Because there are two things in it: respect and admiration. What do the people of the world do when they admire someone, a celebrity or a footballer? They want to be like him, if they can. And when people around them talk about football, they talk about the one they admire.

If we do not admire our Lord and the things He brought, the mystery of the Kingdom of God, if we are not drawn to the Kingdom of God and to the Father, there is no way we can be godly. So let us learn and hold fast to the doctrine which is according to godliness. Then comes the other part as well, like a crown for us: all who desire to live godly in Christ will be persecuted, people will speak evil of them, and the world will hate them.

Which world is meant? Only the world out on the street, or the religious world as well? Who killed the Lord Jesus: the world out on the street or the religious world? Who beat the disciples?

The world out on the street or the religious world? From whom did Peter and John receive beatings? Who killed Stephen? Before he was Paul, he was Saul, and Saul persecuted the believers precisely out of zeal for religion. Wherever he went, he wreaked havoc. Why? Because those people wanted to live godly in Christ, not with godliness towards the law. Let us understand this well: they were persecuted precisely because they wanted to live with godliness towards Christ.

Beware of a godliness that is only form

Let us return to 1 Timothy, chapter 6, so that we may hold fast to the doctrine which is according to godliness. In verse 5, the apostle shows that there are some people who suppose that godliness is a source of gain. It is very important to say: beware of such people. Beware also of those who have only a form of godliness. Why should we beware? Not in order to be unkind to them, but so that we do not become like them and do not grow used to the snare of a false and hypocritical godliness, a godliness that is only form.

We sing beautifully and praise the Lord Jesus. I have often heard: "I would do anything for the Lord Jesus." Today there are many people who do not get vaccinated out of religious conviction, out of respect for God. They are convinced that there is a number there and that all sorts of things from Revelation will come. They have great respect for God and do not want to be vaccinated, even if they may perhaps pay with their lives. Is this godliness? It is a form of godliness, certainly.

True godliness is respect and admiration for the Lord Jesus. But it is a total respect, which imitates the Lord Jesus in everything, not a half respect or a respect of 90%. I did not invent this definition. It exists, and people know what it means to be godly.

The people of the apostle Paul's day knew this very well. Paul asks Timothy to pursue godliness. How could Timothy have done such a thing if he had not known what it means to be godly?

Great gain

We are concerned with the mystery of godliness, and this mystery is great, a great secret. When we respect the Lord Jesus, we love the things He brought. We believe them with an unshakeable trust, not by halves. The apostle writes in 1 Timothy 6:6: “But godliness with contentment is great gain.” If we have godliness, we have great gain.

A little further on, in verse 11, Paul writes: “But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.” It is wonderful to see how the apostle urges us, as men and women of God, to flee from the love of money and from the things of the world and to follow after all these things. Godliness appears here as something distinct, clearly set apart from the others.

The Lord Jesus was heard because of His godly fear, and His godliness was the standard. Let us not turn aside from the Word of God, either to the right hand or to the left. If we have broken any part of the Word of God, our godliness is only a form of godliness.

The Knowledge of the Truth Which Is After Godliness

In the epistle to Titus we find two passages that help us understand this mystery of godliness as fully as possible. But it must be said plainly: without practice, we will never understand this mystery, and we will remain with theory alone. A great many people know the Bible, but they do not know the mystery of the Kingdom of God. They do not know the mystery of the faith, the

mystery of the Church, the mystery of godliness, and they do not know Christ.

The epistle begins like this, in Titus 1:1-2: “Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began;” The knowledge of the truth, then, is after godliness. We cannot have the knowledge of the truth unless we are godly people. We must admire and respect the Lord Jesus so much that we enter into an obedience like that of the constellations of heaven, which move to the millimetre, indeed with far greater precision. Obedience like this does not turn aside from the will of God, either to the left or to the right.

In chapter 2, verses 11 and 12, we read: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world.” Grace teaches us to live in this present world with three things: soberness, righteousness and godliness. Is godliness important? What would happen if we took it out and lived only soberly and righteously? In the last days perilous times will come, and people will be unthankful. Without godliness it cannot be done.

Of the people of those times, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:5: “Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.” Does God have no power? A person says: “Did He ask me to do this as well? I can't, I won't do it.” The Lord says in John 13:14: “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet.” And we, who say that we respect and admire the Lord Jesus so much, reply: “We don't do that. It is only a symbol. Who knows what You meant?” How must we conduct ourselves? With godliness, not without godliness. That is why we must understand what it means to have godliness.

Hebrews 5:7 shows us the godliness of the Lord Jesus. In Hebrews 12:28 we find a command, so that we may understand this great mystery of godliness: “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

The next verse shows why it is fitting for us to worship in this way. Hebrews 12:29 says: “For our God is a consuming fire.”

Both Reverence and Godly Fear

Why do we need both reverence and fear? Some say they fear God, and for that reason they cannot go against the teaching they received in their youth. But that teaching is not found in the Bible. The Bible does indeed speak of fear, but it also speaks of reverence and godliness, that is, of respect and admiration towards the Lord.

The Lord Jesus taught us how to pray (Matthew 6): not babbling the same words over and over, as the heathen do. If we endlessly repeat the same words, we show that we have no godliness. If we say “glory to the blood, glory to the blood” until our tongue gets tangled in our mouth, so that speaking in tongues will come, are we really showing reverence towards God?

Godliness with contentment is great gain for us, because God is a consuming fire. If we do not respect and admire Him, what happens when you fall into the hands of a consuming fire? You get burnt. May God have mercy on us, so that we understand what we are called to: to respect and admire the Lord Jesus and to be drawn to Him.

In 2 Peter, chapter 1, verse 3, the apostle Peter writes: “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.”

This verse seems strange to us, because often we do not even understand what godliness means. When we come across it in the Bible, we ask ourselves: is it meekness, or is it something else? But here we read that God has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness, and specifically through the knowledge of the Lord Jesus. By knowing Him, we learn what godliness is. It is not a matter of a godliness of our own. We must take on the godliness that the Lord Jesus had. When we know Him and see how He lived in godliness towards the Father, we too have godliness.

Peter continues in verses 5–7: “And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.” Then, in verse 8, he says that if we have these things in abundance, they will keep us from being either idle or unfruitful in the full knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We always come back to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus: to know Him and to be like Him. If we have godliness, we will know Him. But the one who does not have these things, who does not have godliness, is described in verses 9–11: “But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

So we need godliness. It is a mystery, and a great one at that. Very few people have access to it. We are stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1), and we can bring them to people. But people who do not live these mysteries will not enter into them and will not come to know them. One of them is the mystery of godliness, and if we do not know it, we will have no entrance into the Kingdom of God.

Also in 2 Peter, in chapter 3, verses 10–12, we read: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?”

What manner of people ought we to be? People of holy conduct and godliness, that is, conduct full of respect and admiration towards our Master.

The Saints and the Godly, in Whom Is All My Delight

A few beautiful words from the Psalms can bring us joy. In Psalm 16:2-3, David says: "O my soul, thou hast said unto the LORD, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee; but to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight." This is the kind of people we must be: people of holy and godly conduct, in whom the Lord can find His delight. We need godliness, without a doubt.

Psalm 12:1, however, shows the other side: "Help, LORD; for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from among the children of men." We see the same condition today: there are no longer godly people; the faithful have failed from among the children of men.

The Lord Jesus said that no one can come to Him unless he is drawn by the Father (John 6:44). To be drawn by the Father means to admire Him, to feel yourself pulled towards Him and to respect God. If we want to come to the Lord Jesus, we must be drawn by the Kingdom of God and respect the Son of God, just as the Son respected the Father.

Here is the mystery of godliness: a respect and an admiration so deep that we do exactly as the Lord Jesus did. If we do not do as He did, we will never come to know true godliness, which leads us into the Kingdom of God.

May the Lord help us so that this is imprinted on our hearts, so that we adore our Heavenly Father and are drawn to Him.

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