

Serving Jesus Together, part 1
September 24, 2017

School is back in session. How many of you are taking a math this year? Why do you have to take math again? Didn't you take math last year? The truth is we cannot learn all of math in one school year. We have to master elementary mathematical concepts before we are ready to learn advanced math. We have to learn addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division before we go on to fractions, algebra, and geometry. That takes time. It takes time to grasp fully the basics. You have to use them awhile before you are ready to learn harder stuff.

The same is true in Christianity. There are basic truths, advanced truths, and truths that are even more advanced. This is most evident in the book of Hebrews. In chapter five of that book the author has been teaching something advanced. Then he bemoans the fact that his readers cannot understand it yet.

Hebrews 5:11-12b (NIV) We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.

He writes that they should be ready to move on to more advanced Christian teaching, but they are not. They should be solid in their understanding of the basics, but they were not. They ought to be able to teach these truths to a friend, but they could not. It seems to be going in one ear and out the other, without lodging permanently in their brains. Now he is going to use a metaphor to help them get his point.

Hebrews 5:12c (NIV) You need milk, not solid food!

He is comparing them to babies. He is using milk and solid food as metaphors for spiritual truth. The milk represents basic Christian truths, like repentance from sin, faith in Jesus, and baptism. The solid food represents the next level of Christian truth.

Hebrews 5:12c-14 (NIV) You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Learning how to distinguish between good and evil is advanced Christian teaching. This is a more mature understanding of the Christian faith and life. This marks the next stage of Christian development. But they were stuck in the elementary stage.

Now we can contrast this to another church, a more mature church, the church at Ephesus. At one point in his ministry, Paul writes a letter to Timothy, who is leading the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus had advanced past elementary Christian truths. I do not mean they had left them behind. I mean they had so internalized them that they were a part of them. They were ready for more advanced stuff. That is what Paul is going to present in his letter.

1 Timothy 3:14-15 (NIV) Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, 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.

"I am writing you these instructions so that... you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household" This was not a new church. In fact, on Paul's third missionary trip, he and Timothy were in Ephesus for over two years. In that time, these Christians had learned the elementary doctrines of the Christian faith. Now they were ready for advanced Christian teaching. And it was going to be hard stuff.

I have never preached on this letter before. I have preached a few verses here and there, but never preached much of what is in here. It contains some tough stuff, teaching that some of you may bristle at. Yet God has led me now to teach these truths.

Paul did not give new Christians everything he knew all at one time. It would be too much to comprehend at one time. He may have touched on some of these things before, but could not go over them in depth because the Ephesian believers were not ready for them. I hope we are ready for them.

We begin with a special word we need to know. It is a word that shows up repeatedly in this letter, more than anywhere else in the New Testament.

The key word of this book is godliness. (1 Timothy 2:2; 3:16; 4:7, 8; 6:5, 6, 11)
Godly = devoted to God; pious⁺, devout⁺⁺,

The word godly is not a Christian word. It was simply a religious word. It could be used of a Roman or Greek, of a Muslim or Hindu. But we can use it in Christianity.

As it is used in the Bible, Godly does not mean God-like, but rather God-focused. Let me make it still clearer for you with the following definition.

Christian Godliness is seeking to live the will of our God in response to the Gospel.

Where do I get this? How do I connect the word godliness with the gospel? Look with me at Paul's letter to Titus.

Titus 2:11-12 (NIV) For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,...

Paul writes something similar in his letter to Timothy. Look at the next verse in our earlier passage.

1 Timothy 3:16 (NIV) 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.

Paul writes of the mystery of godliness. What is the mystery? It should be obvious to a Christian that this mystery concerns Jesus. The basis for our godliness is Jesus.

The Christian mystery is God's plan of salvation through Jesus.

God's plan of salvation through Jesus is the Christian mystery. This plan of sending Jesus to pay the price of our sin is called a mystery because it was hidden for a long time, but now is being revealed. God developed His plan before He ever created the earth.

Colossians 1:25-26 (NIV) I (Paul) have become its (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness-- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.

Before He created Adam and Eve God knew they would eat the forbidden fruit. He knew they would introduce sin into the new world. He knew all people would be lost to Him unless He came up with a plan to save some. So He put together such a plan. But He kept the plan secret until the right time to reveal it. That plan remained a mystery, an unknown, for all of human history until Jesus died and rose from the dead. Then the mystery was revealed. This mystery is what makes Christian godliness possible.

Then Paul inserts what is believed to be an early Christian praise chorus. In Greek, more than in English, it comes across like the lyrics of a song. You may have already guessed what some of the phrases mean. Let's look at them.

"He appeared in a body". This is God made flesh, the Incarnation. It is the incarnation of God that we celebrate at Christmas.

He died a sinner's death, but "was vindicated by the Spirit," raised from the dead. The Holy Spirit gave evidence of who Jesus was with each miracle Jesus performed. But it was the resurrection that most shows Jesus to be who He is. The resurrection shows that Jesus died unjustly, innocent of sin. Raised by the Holy Spirit from the dead, Jesus was vindicated over His enemies. And this was not just to human enemies.

He "was seen by angels", both good and bad.

There were good angels present at the resurrection of Jesus. And it may be that there were demons, sinful angels, there as well. The demons were there to gloat over Jesus. They were as surprised as anyone was when Jesus was raised. It is possible that knowledge of the mystery of the gospel was also kept from the heavenly host, both good and bad. The devil knew Jesus was the God/Man. He may not have known ahead of time that Jesus would die for our sins and be raised from the dead. So it was important for the angels to see Jesus raised from the dead. His victory is a victory over them.

He "was preached among the nations," first by Jesus Himself to His apostles and disciples. They needed to learn the truth. From them the message went out to all the world.

He "was believed on in the world," first by His followers. Many others believed as the good news spread.

He "was taken up in glory," the Ascension we see in Acts 1:9.

These are just some of the basic facts about Jesus. Such facts must become a part of us. We must become so understanding of them that we can easily explain them to someone else. Then God builds us up in these truths to go on to godliness. To live godly lives we must seek to know and live God's will. Now 99% of God's will is in the Bible. While it does not address every circumstance or question directly, there are general commands and principals that guide us on all topics.

For example, we are taught to love each other as Christians. This is an elementary teaching. It was one of three qualities the apostles were most looking for in the churches. The other two were faith and hope.

This Christian love for each other covers many potential problems that can come up in churches. He does not need to write specifically of all the subjects that would be covered under loving each other. Once a church grows strong in love for each other, strong in faith, strong in hope, fully living the gospel, they would be ready for more advanced Christian teaching.

I suggest you start reading this letter through and through over the next weeks. And as you read, seek understanding. As your understanding grows, inform your prayers by these truths. And choose to live them out in obedience to Jesus.

So over the course of the next weeks we will be learning how the people of God should conduct themselves in the household of God.

Invitation

How about you?

Have you fully accepted the good news of Jesus?

Have you fully accepted that you are a sinner before God?

Have you fully accepted that you need a Savior?

Have you fully accepted that Jesus is the only Savior available?

Have you fully accepted that He is able and willing to save YOU?

Have you fully accepted that believing in Jesus means to turn your life over to Him as Lord?

Then what is keeping you from receiving Him?

What is keeping you from baptism?

What is keeping you from coming out publicly for Jesus?

Now is the day to do so.

[†]Devout = sincere devotion to one's faith, (from Latin, *devotus*, **DEVOTED**)

^{††}Pious = scrupulous adherence to the forms of one's religion, (from Latin *purus*, **PURE**)