



## **SECRET TO A GODLY LIFE**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century world is full of advice on how to live a long life, a healthy life, a contented life, a fulfilled life. How to do what's best for your body / heart / mind / digestion / sleep / hair / skin / eyes / teeth / and so on.

This is not a new concept: even in the ancient world, they had some thoughts on all this, some good, some slightly questionable. Today, we're going to consider another:

How to live a good life. As in, a godly one.

### **1 Timothy 3:14-4:16**

Paul kicks off in vs16 by quoting a 1<sup>st</sup> century hymn:

*Mega estin to tes eusebeias mysterion.*

"Great is the mystery of godliness."

What exactly does that mean? It's another way of saying, "Great is the secret to a godly life." And the hymn seems to be describing the life and mission of Jesus.

We'll come back to that at the end. But in ch4, Paul discusses those who have their own ideas about what makes a person 'godly' – ideas which usually entailed separating yourself from the things of the world. As we've seen, these teachers became known as the Gnostics. And Paul isn't exactly positive about them (he brands them 'demonically led' and 'hypocritical liars'!).

He then gives Timothy some advice on how the world *should* be viewed. What does this tell us about godliness?

**1) Be Grateful For The Joys** (4:1-5). Gnosticism had a very dualistic, very black and white view of the universe – but it drew up the battle lines in a strange place, by saying that everything in this world is bad, everything in the next world is good. So, eating meat is bad; getting married is bad; enjoying any kind of material stuff is?

Bad.

The Bible, on the other hand, says things like, “And God saw all that He had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1); “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it” (Psalm 24); “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isaiah 6). That’s what Paul means by these things being made holy by the Word of God, and prayer.

But what about the kosher laws, you might ask? Why did God say no to hotdogs and seafood paella? To create a distinctiveness that needed to exist, at that moment. OT Israel needed to be different, otherwise it would never have survived (how often was Israel’s relationship with God on a knife-edge? And the future of the world, too?).

Christianity, as we’ll see, requires a different kind of distinctiveness.

**2) Be Careful Of The Killjoys** (4:6-10). In some letters Paul has to warn his readers to avoid this behaviour or that. Here, he tells Timothy to avoid a particular kind of teaching – what he calls “worldly ideas and old wives’ tales.” By which he means people who had confused godliness with rejecting anything enjoyable. I.e. spiritual no-bots.

Today it might be: “If you’re a Christian you shouldn’t drink alcohol; go to parties; have a Spotify account; read secular novels; watch Hollywood movies; play online video games; follow the latest fashion trends; take up martial arts,” etc. Hence the saying, “Christians are better known for what they don’t do than what they do, do.”

Where does this come from? Maybe it’s fear (“Our faith is so fragile it wouldn’t take much to break it”), or misguidedness (“The world has been corrupted, so that must mean every bit of it is bad”), or pride (“Saying this gives me a sense of authority / superiority”).

Paul acknowledges that what we do or don’t do can have its benefits – but that’s not what makes us godly.

What makes us godly is what’s been done *for* us (vs9-10).

**3) Be Faithful To The Joy-Giver** (4:11-16). We need to recognise that the pendulum can swing too far the other way. And interestingly, towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century another group, the Nicolaitans, began saying, “You can do whatever you want physically, coz your body is separate from your spirit and has no real impact on it.” Which gets slammed as an excuse for sin by the Apostle John in his first letter and in Revelation ch2.

Paul seems to anticipate this. Hence "Don't let anyone look down on you because of your youth, but be an example ..."

- In speech. In the words that you use, and the way that you use them.
- In lifestyle. In your decisions, in the things you prioritise and fill your time with.
- In love. In how you treat other people, starting with your brothers and sisters in Christ.
- In faithfulness. In your prayer life, reading of Scripture, commitment to church.
- In purity. In leading a morally different life; in your faith standing out.

And he wraps up by instructing Timothy to fulfil his calling by reading, declaring, and teaching Scripture.

The point is: we need to navigate a path between 2 extremes – saying no to everything and saying yes to everything. We need to strike a balance by rejoicing in the gifts that God has given us while recognising the boundaries He has put in place.

Go too far in either direction ... you could end up somewhere iffy.

### **And This Matters ... Why?**

Paul, then, encourages Timothy – and by extension, us – to take a different, more nuanced, approach to the world than the Gnostics were doing. And here's why it matters, I think:

- Separating ourselves from every bit of this world could – if not *will* – mean we become separate from and irrelevant to the people we need to reach. The people who need to know us so they can know Him.
- We insult the God who has created a world to be enjoyed and has been kind and gracious enough to do so. Yes, there's the need for discernment. But we also need to be thankful for His gifts to us.
- But perhaps most importantly: we can end up adding to what Jesus did on the cross (and sometimes even replacing it), by suggesting it's all about us doing this, or abstaining from that. About what *we* do.

Which brings us back to that hymn in 3:16. This is the secret to a godly life: trusting in the One who entered this world, died for it, and kickstarted its restoration by rising from the dead.

*That's* what makes us godly.