

Title: Heaven on Earth  
Text: 1 Timothy 3.14-16  
Theme: The treasure that the church must protect  
Series: 1 Timothy (Christmas Sunday)  
Prop Stmt: The message of Christ is the most glorious and therefore the most precious treasure that has ever and will ever be. The manner in which we guard it, affects the manner in which we view it.

Here is what this sermon is ultimately about: The biggest problem that you will ever face has already been taken care of by Christ. Believe it and rejoice!

Read Text:

When Cathi and I were in Europe, we visited a museum that housed some of the treasures of the Holy Roman Emperors. While they were not particularly my taste, they were impressive. But, think of the purpose of this museum. Your task is two-fold. 1) You have to display these objects in a way that showcases their beauty and glory and 2) You have to protect them. In this text, we are told that we, the church are called to do the same thing. Our mission is to display (put up on a pillar) our treasure so that all can see her glory and beauty and at the same time protect that treasure so that it is not desecrated.

This morning, I am jumping ahead in our study of 1 Timothy because this text at the end of chapter 3 fits so well with Christmas. Let me explain. 1 Timothy is a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy (or padawan for Star Wars fans), to inform him how things are to function in the church. But here, Paul focuses on the “why.” Why is it important the church have the right type of governance, polity, a proper view of roles and the right type of leaders is because what we are displaying and protecting is the most glorious treasure in the entire universe. Paul describes this treasure as “the truth” in v.15, “the mystery of godliness” in v.15 and then expands on it in v.16.

The truth and the mystery of godliness that we are to prominently display and protect is Christ. The emphasis of this letter is on how the church is supposed to be organized and how she is to function. But, the reason for this organization and function is not efficiency. The reason is Christ. Everything that the Scriptures lay out for the function of the church is so that the message of Christ will be prominently displayed. This morning, we are going to look at what that message is. By the way, when I talk about the person of Christ, and the message of Christ and the gospel of Christ, I am talking about the same thing because you cannot separate who Christ is, from what he said, and from what he did, and is doing and will do. It is a wonderful package deal.

1. **The message of Christ is supremely important.** (16a)

There are so many things that compete for your attention and for your affection. There are the expectations of others that many of you live under and they are a monstrous weight to bear. Do this. Be here. Be there. Be here and there at the same time. Buy this. Fix this. Get this gift. Decorate like this. Make me happy. Make my life perfect. Be like

this. Pay this. Get these grades. Don't be like that. Wear this. Look like this. Live like this. Drive this car. Make this much money. Those expectations can be helpful to a degree, but they can be a curse that robs you of all joy because the expectations of others are never satisfied. But these are the voices that you hear in your head. This is the message you are tempted to listen to and be owned by. Those expectations try to convince you that they should be revered and obeyed. In the end, they don't matter. In the end, what matters is you and God. The message of Christ is therefore of supreme importance and greatness. And by the way, the message of Christ is also how you can rightfully view the expectations of others, without being owned by them, or calloused to them. For the sake of your soul and your joy, pay attention to the message of Christ, it is supremely important. It is what we display and protect.

## 2. **The message of Christ is a mystery.** (16b)

There's an old folk story from India about the two men who were traveling together on foot over a long journey. The one had a valuable gem, and the other guy who joined him tried to make it appear as if he was just happened to join him but in reality was looking to steal the gem. Every night, when the second traveler was convinced the first guy was fast asleep, he would rifle through all of his stuff in order to find the gem, but night after night, he could never find it. During the day, they would both act as if they were friends, but night after night this game of hide and seek would go on. When they finally reached their destination, the first traveler told the would-be thief that he knew what the man was trying to do all along. The thief, utterly stupefied asked the 1<sup>st</sup> guy where he hid the gem and the man told him that every night he had placed it under the thief's pillow because he knew that this was the last place where the man would look.

When Paul talks about the mystery of godliness, this is the kind of mystery he means. It is not a mystery in the sense of being mystical, but a mystery in the sense that it was not figured out. Born of a virgin? Born into a poor family? Grow up in Nazareth? Work as a carpenter for 18 years? Didn't come from the right schools, get the right awards, know the right people, look the part? The Messiah was expected, but not the way Jesus came. And yet, here he was, claiming to be the Christ, claiming God as his Father, demonstrating authority over sickness, over death, over nature, as well as proving from the OT scriptures that they all pointed to him. And there was no arguing with him. He was faultless. So, yes, the message of Christ was a mystery in that sense, but it is a mystery that you have to get over. Christ himself said, "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*" (John 5.39-40) If you rejected him, you hated him because he was so unrelenting consistent and effective at exposing your own sin. The message of Christ is still like that. The message of Christ is utterly exasperating for those who refuse to admit their sinfulness. The message of Christ is frustrating for those who refuse to accept that they cannot save themselves. It was not and still is not what we naturally expect, because we naturally think that we can save ourselves, or that our sin is not that bad. But, rightfully understood and believed...

## 3. **The message of Christ is glorious.** (16c)

The last part of verse 16 is fascinating. It is quite possibly a hymn or creed that was used in the early church. The arrangement of this verse illustrates why I think it is so fitting to preach this on Christmas Sunday. On Christmas, we celebrate the advent (coming) of our King and Savior, Jesus Christ. Our Savior, came to us as God and from God. Christ was heaven on earth and that is emphasis of these six lines. (Slide) These six lines are arranged as three couplets, each with two lines. (Slide) Each couplet is a complementing contrast between something earthly and something heavenly.

This is the heart of Christmas. This is the heart of the incarnation. God became man. Heaven came to earth. There in the manger was the perfect combination of heaven and earth and if you know the story of the Bible, you know that heaven on earth is how it all began and how it will all end. In the garden of Eden, God walked on the earth with his own creation and gloried in them as he delighted in them. In the new heavens and new earth, God will dwell with man and will be gloried in them even as he delights in us. Christ is ground zero for all of that. Christ is the essence and the only means by which that can happen. This is the message that we proclaim and we defend. It is all summarized in these six lines. Now, we have this tradition of singing the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of our Christmas Sunday service. Handel wrote that in 1742. So, it is kind of neat to sing something that people have been singing about Christ for almost 275 years. But, you would most likely hear this text repeated in a church service by the early believers almost 2,000 years ago. But, it is more than nostalgic, it is important. The three sub points reflect each couplet. The first couplet calls us to...

#### A. **See what Christ has done.** (16a)

The first line states that he was manifested in the flesh. Who is the he? Do you see it in verse 15? The "he" of verse 16 is called the living God in verse 15. The living God was manifested in the flesh. But, that was the part of the mystery of godliness. The living God did not show up like we thought he would and because he appeared to be so ordinary, most people stumbled over that and they still do. God became man? God actually became an actual man? Who ever heard of such a thing? Who would ever come up with such an idea? That is crazy, right!? The manifestation of God in the flesh, is what made it so difficult to believe that he was God. That makes sense. Let's say that you had a brand new pick-up truck. These new trucks are amazing! And let's say that you let your 17 year old son take it out for a spin, and in a moment of insanity that 17 year olds are capable of, he went 4-wheelin in it. And an hour and half later he brings it home completely caked in mud. And you say, "hey, looks like you had a good time." Right?! No! You say, "What have you done to my truck?" He could honestly say that did not take anything away from your truck, he just added something to it. The layers of mud did not remove the glory of the truck, they just made it difficult to see it. God became flesh and the flesh he took on, did not remove his glory, it just made it difficult to see.

When Christ went public and claimed to be God, his own brothers did not initially believe him. The Jewish leaders did not believe him. Even the disciples who loved him and followed him, took a long time to understand what he was saying. The living God

was manifested in the flesh! And then to complicate matters. He died. How could God die? Later we would realize why he had to be manifested in the flesh and why he had to die. The only way for humans to be saved was for a human to pay the penalty for our sin. We had to have one of our own to represent us completely. Animals could not do that. Animal sacrifices could only point to and prefigure the perfect sacrifice to come. But, in the moment, when Christ was on the earth it was hard to see all of that. Christ looked so human. He looked so human because he was human. But, he was also God. God had come to earth, but, Isaiah prophesied, who would believe it? But, this really is the heart of Christmas. You cannot really grasp the birth of Christ unless you understand that he was God born as a human in order to die. There was plenty of evidence to support this claim as he demonstrated omniscience and omnipotence. But, one thing sealed it.

He was vindicated by the Spirit. What does that mean? To be vindicated means to be revealed as being right. This past summer in the Olympic games in Rio, you may remember that the Russian swimmer Yulia Efimova was suspended from the Russian team for using performance enhancing drugs (PED). But, then, amazingly just before the Olympic games began, Yulia was reinstated. 19 year old Lilly King, one of our best swimmers of the breaststroke, was livid. It was not right and Lilly said so. The two met in the pool for the 100 meter finals, and Lilly won gold. She was vindicated.

Romans 1.4 helps us understand how Christ was vindicated when it says that he “was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...” The resurrection of Christ by the power of the Spirit vindicated Christ. He said he was God. He said that he was the Savior of the world. He said that he was going to die and that by his death he would pay for our sin and offer us pardon. He said that he would be rejected. He said that he would be betrayed. He said that he would be denied. But he also said that he would rise again and would one day rule the world. And he backed up his promises with his resurrection. He was vindicated! Everything that he said about himself was true!

Now, we are almost 2,000 years removed from the life and ministry of Christ. In many parts of our world, there is a level of respect given to Christ. But the early church did not have that. They were following someone that no one had ever heard about in other places of the world and in Israel, Christ remained hidden. You can see why this line in the hymn or creed is so important. We need to be reminded that everything that Christ claimed is indeed true. Christ is worth banking your life on. See what Christ has done.

#### **B. Make Christ known. (16b)**

At his birth, the angels declared his glory. Luke tells us the story in his famous account of the birth of Christ that when the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds that these poor guys just about died from fear, and you cannot blame them. Do you remember the words? Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” This is where Christmas cards and Christmas pageants do not help us. The fear of the shepherds was not simply one of surprise. They were terrified because they

had come face to face with beings they had never seen before who possessed power that was otherworldly. These shepherds were absolutely powerless before the angel of the Lord when “suddenly” the skies opened up and this angel was joined by a heavenly host. When you think of a heavenly host, do not think of our Sunday morning choir, holding music in their hands, happily singing about God. Oh no. When you read heavenly host, you need to think, heavenly armies. You need to think thousands and thousands of celestial warriors, organized in companies and brigades as far as the eye could see. You need to feel the expansive openness as their assembly to attention reverberates far into space. You need to hear and be shaken by the thunderous battle cry, the chant, the cadence, “Glory to God!” These glorious beings showed up at his birth because they knew that the source of their glory was the baby lying in a manger. The glory of that child outshone the collective glory of those angels. They knew it. They saw him. For thousands of years, these millions of angels basked in his glory. Their entire existence was for the sole purpose of making Christ known. And here they were making Christ known.

But, look at the next line in the verse: “proclaimed among the nations.” What is the relationship between “seen by angels” and “proclaimed among the nations”? Angel actually means “messenger.” These angels declared his glory at his birth, and what they did was a preview of what we are doing. 2,000 years later, halfway around the globe in a land that the ancient world did not even know existed, in nations the ancient world could even imagine, the glory of Christ is being declared. What the angels declared then is being done even now. Christ’s glory is being proclaimed among the nations and it should be. And one of the beautiful realities about Christ is that you cannot oversell him. You cannot find enough words to describe his glory.

Many of you have been disappointed with things you bought. You read the description, you saw the pictures, but the actual item wasn’t exactly how it appeared, right? Brochures depicting vacation destinations are notorious for using pictures that make things look so much bigger and so much better than they really are. Others let you down. Kids break your heart. People break promises. But, you will never be disappointed with Christ. He is incapable of letting you down. He is incapable of breaking a promise. He is incapable of telling a lie. He is incapable of not completing what he started. He is incapable of failing. He is incapable of coming up short. His love endures forever. His glory causes suns to blush. He is worth your trust. He is worth you telling others about. He is worth believing in. He is worth proclaiming. He is worth singing about. He is worth worshiping. He is worth going to all the nations and telling people about.

### **C. Rejoice and Hope! (16c)**

(choir and orch assemble)

This is our response. Believe! I use the word “rejoice” because rejoice is a joyful faith and the message of Christ produces a joyful faith and it produces a joyful faith all over the world. For 2,000 years the message of Christ has been going out into the world. People from all over this world have been hearing that the Creator of this world knows

them, and loves them and has done something to rescue them from their sin. This God came to this earth in order to live the life that you could not live and die the death that you could die. Every where this message goes, there are people who believe it. And every person who believes it is adopted into the family of God and made a citizen of the kingdom of Christ and now await his glorious and triumphant return. He is taken up in glory and when he comes back, he will not return in a manger, but on a white horse.

We are those who believe. We are those who rejoice. We are those who hope. And if you do not yet believe, why not? There's room for you. There's a place for you. There's a home for you. There's salvation for you. There's forgiveness for you. There's life and hope and eternity for you. It is yours, only in Christ.