

## How do You Say “Godliness” in Thai? (2 Peter 1:3)

Karl Dahlfred

I was preparing a Bible study on Psalm 19 in Thai, and wanted to cross-reference 2 Peter 1:3 (“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness... “ 2 Peter 1:3 ESV) but when I went to the standard version of the Thai Bible that is most widely used in the churches (1971 version which is similar to the RSV), I wondered whether the word that they had for godliness (“*tham*” ธรรม) was really the best choice.

In common Thai, *tham* refers to the body of Buddhist teaching or the Dharma. In Christian language, it is often modified with the word “Christ” (hence *Phra Christ Tham* พระคริสตธรรม) to refer to the Bible, or Christian teaching. It still remains however, that the word *tham* by itself makes most people think of religious teaching, particularly moral or ethical teaching. So, are we to understand that godliness is merely ethical living? I opened up my Greek New Testament to find out what the original word was and found *eusebeia*. My Intermediate Greek Lexicon (Liddell & Scott) tells me that *eusebeia* means “*reverence towards the gods, piety religion.*” That is the general secular ancient Greek meaning. The definition of *eusebeia* includes “reverence” which the New Oxford American Dictionary defines as “feeling or showing deep and solemn respect”.

So, I am thinking that godliness (*eusebeia*) in the Biblical sense certainly includes moral living (as the word *tham* would indicate), but also a reverent, respectful attitude that honors God in all of life. There is a certain seriousness and soberness of mind that is included in godliness. Godliness is not just the ethical things that we do, but is an attitude and a perspective that encompasses all of life. Godliness is the desire and intention to honor God in thought, word, and deed. If that’s the case, how can godliness be conveyed best in Thai?

I looked in three other Thai translations to see what they use. The Thai New Contemporary Version (similar to NIV in English), lumps life and godliness together into “living a life in God’s way” (ดำเนินชีวิตในทางพระเจ้า). The New Thai Translation Version also lumps them together into “a life that is lead according to God’s ways” (ชีวิตที่ดำเนินตามวิถีทางของพระเจ้า). These are both good, in that they emphasize obedience to God in all of life but I think prefer the translation that I found in the Easy to Read version put out by the World Bible Translation Center. It reads “a life that honors God” (ชีวิตที่ให้เกียรติพระเจ้า). The word “honor” captures something of the original sense of reverence and respect for God because He is higher and greater than us. Frankly though, I can’t say that anyone of these translations is THE BEST because it is difficult to capture in one word or in a short phrase the true sense and meaning of *eusebeia*. Even in English, godliness is one of those Christian words that many people would be hard pressed to define succinctly if put on the spot. If you’d asked me not too long ago, I would have

answered, "I guess it has something to do with living like God wants you to, and honoring Him, but I'm not really sure."

Communicating the Gospel in any language is a difficult task if it is to be done well, and the task becomes more complicated when I need to teach the Bible in a language that is not my own. What do the words that show up in the Thai Bible make people think of when they hear them? What words need to be explained, and how do I do that in a way that clears away misunderstanding and builds a right understanding of what God is saying in the Bible? Good Bible teaching that helps people understand what God wants to communicate in Scripture takes a lot of hard work, and one must be a student of the Scripture and a student of the culture. Then add in a second language and I've got my job cut out for me. Thankfully, salvation depends upon God and not upon whether I've gotten things just right, yet all the same my goal is that which the Apostle Paul gave to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."  
(2 Timothy 2:15 ESV)