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Wholly Affections

How many of you possess “Wholly Affections”? By “Wholly Affections” I am referring to desires which color everything we think and say- they are affections which impact everything we do! And in the case of the passage before us, they are desires which pertain to the people of God, the body of Christ! When it comes to Christ’s church, fundamentally what are we to long for?

This is an important question especially in the age in which we live. Ours is a consumer era such that much of what we think, do, and say revolves around that which is best for US! And we tend to look at the church in this way.

Many a seminary will tell you that if a church is going to market itself well, it must address five areas of need. To be *competitive* with other churches today, you must have:

- A thriving and exciting youth group.
- A modern, well-equipped nursery.
- An exciting, engaging worship service.
- Practical and somewhat humorous messages which inspire the entire family.
- A professional look/feel that makes the seeker (which is another word for the customer) believe that this is an up and coming church!

That no doubt is why 1 Thessalonians 5 will seem counterintuitive to the modern believer because they will see that it is NOT about us! It contains the passion and the desire that Paul had for the body of Christ at Thessalonica- and it didn't include his needs!

But this is so important to have a healthy church. Each of us must hold and work towards a specific set of goals for the benefit of the body. The goals will NOT necessarily benefit us, BUT they are ones which honor the Lord and provide for a healthy church.

We know that the church in Thessalonica held a special place in Paul's heart. Paul had been used by God to plant the church during his second missionary journey and yet, having been run out of the city and doggedly pursued by a very vocal group of Jewish fanatics, Paul sent Timothy back to the city to inquire as to whether this body was still walking with and so serving the Lord.

After some time, Timothy returned and reported that the Thessalonians not only remained faithful to the Lord, but they loved Paul and remained grateful for his coming. And it was in response to this that Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians

1. To express his praise to the Lord,
2. To encourage the Thessalonians to strive still more in their walks,
3. And to address some of the struggles they were having.

With this purpose accomplished, Paul entered into his "final approach" in which he gives a benediction which expresses his ultimate desires for this congregation; and so His Wholly Affections!

Now that begs the question, of what do wholly affections consist? And secondly, what should our desire be for the church body?

[A Longing for the Church's Corporate Devotion](#)

1 Thessalonians 5:23, "now."

This is an adversative conjunction which sets this section apart from everything Paul has just

said] “may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely. It is clear one of Paul’s top priorities for this church was its “sanctification.” This ought NOT to surprise us for earlier in this epistle Paul told the Thessalonians this:

1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God [IOW, this is God’s agenda for the Thessalonians and, for that matter, every church... in fact this in part is what is behind all that God is doing in and through our lives], your sanctification...”

What is “sanctification”? The word is ἁγιασμός (*hagiasmos*) or here, ἁγιάζω (*hagiazō*), both are used in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate the Hebrew word, קִדְשׁ (*qedesh*). As we’ve seen, this is a major word in the Old Testament referencing *anything that is different on account of its association with God*. Kittel describes it this way:

The old Greek term hágos denotes an object of awe, the adjective hagés means ‘clean,’ and the verb házō has the sense ‘to shrink fRomans’ (Kittel & Friedrich, 1984, pp. 14-15)

In understanding this, we start with the truth that God is transcendent, which means He is above/beyond/higher than the created world. He is NOT creation... He is *other* than it! A. W. Tozer wrote this:

When we try to imagine what God is like, we must of necessity use that-which-is-not-God as the raw material for our minds to work on; hence whatever we visualize God to be, He is not, for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand. (Tozer, 2009, p. 16)

Truly, God is holy which again speaks of His “otherness”! NOW because God is completely different/set apart from creation, anything in creation associated with God likewise becomes holy/קִדְשׁ (*qedesh*). And so in the Bible we read:

- Holy people, Deuteronomy 28:9.
- A holy nation, Exodus 19:6.
- Holy ground, Exodus 3:5.
- A holy day, Nehemiah 10:31.
- A holy assembly, Exodus 12:16.
- Etc.!¹

All of which are set apart or different because their association with God!² Now because they hold this status, they are NOT used in an ordinary way! For example, we read this:

2 Timothy 2:20, “Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also

vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.”

Such a distinction is made in ordinary living. In our own lives, we have special dinnerware, special clothing, special chairs, special spots in nature. How much more so with God and His Kingdom? Accordingly, Peter wrote this:

1 Peter 1:15-16, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

What practically does this mean? It speaks of a behavior dictated by one’s position. We “are to be holy [different] in all [our] behavior”! Why? Because God is holy and we are His! That is the idea behind the word “sanctify” or “sanctification” in the Bible. God lives in a high and holy place. In salvation, He has set us apart to that place as well! Accordingly, in all our living we are called to be wholly devoted to God and therefore different from the world!

Now get this, such is GOD’S AGENDA for everyone in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:3) and so this also must be that which is OUR AGENDA for everyone in this body. Therefore, Paul wrote this:

1 Thessalonians 5:23, “now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you [second place, He is talking about the entire church] entirely.”

The word for “entirely” is ὁλοτελής (*holotelēs*) which could be translated as, “every part of each of you.”³ It is a quantitative term focusing here on *the parts* of the Church which make up the whole and so the teachers, the servers, the prayers, the leaders, the young, the old, etc.

From this we see that it was Paul’s greatest longing that the entire ministry of the church in Thessalonica flow from their realized status of being claimed by God and therefore set apart unto HIS purpose, not our own, not man’s, not the seeker’s, and most certainly not the unbeliever’s! *And yet, that still falls short!*

The church of the Pharisee in its day was incredibly successful. The church was full of spiritual giants bound by God’s word! Matthew 5:20 described the ministry as being “blameless with regards to the law.” Its preacher was one of the most well-known and powerful preachers of the day. Matthew 23:2 said that the church had, “Great teachers of the law.”

As to the people of the church of the Pharisee it had a 99% attendance rating including TWO mid-week services. Luke 18:11 said that its members, “Fast twice a week.” And the typical member tithed 20% of their income! Now, Matthew 23:23 tells us that its members were faithful givers (which in Christ’s day amounted to no less than 20% if not more).

In the church of the Pharisee, almost everyone was active in evangelism. In fact, the lay ministers of this church put modern evangelism programs to shame. Matthew 23:15 indicates that their members “scoured the country looking for converts!”

In fact, this church was so successful that it held annual conferences on its ministry. The testimonies of those attending were incredible. Matthew 23:27 tells us that they “appeared beautiful on the outside” to every examination of which there were many!

The most incredible part is that this church was orthodox; it hadn’t compromised for the sake of growth, being contemporary, etc. Matthew 15 & Mark 7 indicate that the church continually went beyond the requirements of the law.

Yet this church had a serious problem: It wasn’t pleasing to God! It turns out their “devotion” was fake as it was all external Christ described this church this way:

Matthew 15:7-8, “You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me.’”

Their ministry was NOT the overflow of a people whose heart belonged to God. RATHER, it was the overflow of a heart in love with themselves and their religion. This no doubt was why Paul’s passion and longing for the Thessalonians and all churches was their “sanctification.”

1 Thessalonians 5:23, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely...”

Without this sanctification, this core devotion to the Lord, the Thessalonians would not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14b). Truly, it is this sanctification that makes:

- Biblical worship true worship!
- Our devotion, genuine!
- Any aspiration of care, loving!

Thinking of *The Church of the Pharisee*, I wonder how many times has this error been repeated by the church throughout the ages? Many churches today, “play church.” These churches do what they do because:

- “That is how they did it during the Reformation!”
- “That is what they do at name the church?”
- “That is how this man of God or that woman of God lived!”

As important as it might be to stand on the shoulders of brothers and sisters that have gone before us, nevertheless in all that we do as a body we must *begin* NOT with what solid believers did in the past or are doing in the present, BUT with God’s desires, expectations, and will when it comes to ministry! Otherwise we will be copying copies which always results in degradation!

Devotion to God is an attitude of the heart, not the amount of stuff that we as a church are doing in the kingdom of God. J.I. Packer criticized the church today:

Modern Christians tend to make busyness their religion. We admire and imitate, and

so become, Christian workaholics, supposing that the busiest believers are always the best... We run round doing things for God and leave ourselves no time for prayer. Yet that does not bother us, for we have forgotten the old adage that if you are too busy to pray, you really are too busy... This is activism: activity gone to seed through not being grounded on sustained self-distrust and dependence on God. But activism is not holiness, nor is it the fruit of holiness, and the activist's preoccupation with his own plans and schemes and know-how tends to keep him from either seeking holiness or increasing in it. (Packer, 1984, p. 98)

So Christian, what should your agenda be for the church? It must be that our ministry, work, passion, worship, etc. flow from God, a love for Him, and a desire to do ministry His way! And yet, it goes beyond this. Notice Paul's second passion for the body of Christ at Thessalonica is a longing for the church's individual purity.

1 Thessalonians 5:23, "now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body..."

In contrast to the first part of this verse where Paul expressed his concern for the entire church body, the emphasis here is on the individual member of the church. In this regard it is important to note that the expression, "spirit, soul, and body," was a colloquial way of indicating the entire person in Scripture.

Deuteronomy 6:5, "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

This doesn't mean that on top of our "spirit, soul, and body," the Bible also makes a distinction as it relates to the "heart." Rather, Moses here is laying emphasis on *the entire person*. We must love God with everything in us; that's the idea! When Christ asked the lawyer what the most important commandment was, the lawyer answered:

Luke 10:27, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind..."

This lawyer is NOT making an ontological assertion regarding that which constitutes a human being. RATHER he simply is expressing the idea of fullness/completeness! D. M. Martin put it this way:

The three terms used in v. 23, 'spirit, soul and body,' occur in a context stressing wholeness. Paul was not emphasizing the threefold nature of humanity but the deliverance of the 'whole' (holoklēron) person. (Martin, 1995, p. 189)

And so, Paul here is NOT talking about three facets of our being as Christians. RATHER, Paul is talking about a purity/holiness that saturates the entire man! Notice as Paul continues he states this:

1 Thessalonians 5:23, “and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame.”

The first word is “preserve.” It is τηρέω (*tēreō*) in the Greek and is translated as “to keep in custody,” “to hold,” “to keep under guard,” and so “to defend” or “protect.” It is a military expression used of a well-guarded prisoner or position! In this regard, it was Paul’s desire that the people of God in Thessalonica stand vigilance over their personal life, “And may your spirit and soul and body be preserved...”

The second word is “complete.” The word for “complete” is ὁλόκληρος (*holoklēros*) literally means “with integrity” or “without damage.” The word refers to what is physically untouched or of an unblemished sacrifice (which means Paul is mixing the metaphor here). In fact, the word was used in the LXX to refer to the construction of the Altar describing the “whole” (and so undamaged) stones that were to be used (Deuteronomy 27:6).

The idea is that the believers in Thessalonica stand guard over their lives with such vigilance that their soul would be kept from all harm or injury! What is the harm/injury Paul has in mind here? That the child of God would “be preserved complete.”

The third word is “without blame.” The word for “without blame” is ἀμέμπτως (*amemptōs*) which was a word used in the context of worship in the Old Testament (the metaphor has completely shifted from that of the military to that of worship). The word refers to an offering that is

- (1) Blameless because it conforms to the norm or standard given by God and so
- (2) Wholly acceptable. In this context, it refers to a spotless sacrifice.

That is the idea! The harm/damage Paul is referring to here is that of impurity, defilement, or sin! Paul’s second passion for the church in Thessalonica was that each member of the body stand vigilant over their soul and so remain morally upright and pure- that they not be defiled by the food of the Babylonians (to use a metaphor from Daniel). Before Paul’s mind’s eye lay an enormous reality for which you and I must be ready, *the Second Coming of Christ!*

1 Thessalonians 5:23, “And may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

As we have seen, the Second Coming of Christ was a major emphasis of Paul’s teaching to the Thessalonians (in fact, Paul references it no less than eight times in this epistle) as well as a major theme in Scripture. As Christians, we are to have an eschatological bent to our outlook such that in all things we are anticipating the return of our Lord- that is THE Christian hope (Romans 5:2; Colossians 1:27; Titus 2:13)!

Combining the language here, at the end of this age there is going to be a Cosmic Worship

Service in which we, God's people, will be presented to God as a holy sacrifice acceptable to the Lord (~Romans 12:1-2). As such, Paul's passion for the Thessalonians was that in and through all things they guard their hearts such that they remain an "undefiled offering" of Christ's to His Father!⁴

So not only did Paul have a passion for the ministry of the Thessalonian church to overflow from a heart devoted to Christ and His word, BUT he also longed for the individual members of the church to remain undefiled for the day of Christ Jesus! It is as commanded in:

Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it *flow* the springs of life."

1 Timothy 4:16a, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things..."

Romans 12:1, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship."

Accordingly, each of us must hold as our goal for the church its fidelity and its purity to the Lord and His word! Before you long for this church to be

- Welcoming Church.
- Living Church.
- Growing Church.
- Thriving Church.

Long for this church to be a faithful church to the Lord and His word! And let this longing begin with you! I love how Robert Murray McCheyne put it; "My people's greatest need is... my personal holiness." (Packer, 1984, p. 99)

As ministers in the kingdom of God and servants one to another, we must labor and strive for purity. This is where Wholly Affections start and end!

And yet, how do we prove faithful to this calling? How do we ourselves strive for purity as well as maintain Wholly Affections for the body of Christ at Bethel?

The means through which these affections are realized is God! It is not external laws or corporate intimidation, not religious activities or a spiritual engifting. Rather such Affections come as the Lord works individually in the heart and lives of His people. This is why this closing Benediction is a prayer:

1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself ['himself' is in the emphatic position laying emphasis on God as the primary actor here] sanctify you entirely; and

may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete...”

Clearly all that Paul longed for when it came to the Thessalonians would occur only as God Himself worked in and through them! And yet we must see that God does His sanctifying work through secondary means. Notice a very important statement:

1 Thessalonians 5:23b, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely.”

The expression, “God of peace” speaks of a God who has made peace between the sinner and Himself. It is only as a church body is comprised of individuals who understand God’s grace and so live in light of His peace that it will fulfill the call referenced in this passage!⁵ That means while there is nothing wrong with

- Examining every ministry to ensure that it is flowing from the Lord, His word, and the passion to be faithful to Him.
- Personal disciplines of a religious nature like worship, reading the word, fellowshiping with the body of Christ.

The securing of the affections of this passage will only come as individually we are relying upon Christ and so growing in our walks with the Lord (cf. Philippians 2:12-13).

References

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End Note(s)

¹ A fuller list is: holy people (Deuteronomy 28:9), a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), holy ground (Exodus 3:5),

a holy day (Nehemiah 10:31), an holy assembly (Exodus 12:16), holy men (Exodus 22:31), a holy place (Exodus 29:30-31), holy food (Exodus 29:34), holy garments (Exodus 35:21), holy gifts (Lev. 22:3ff), holy utensils (1 Kings 8:4), a holy temple (1 Chron. 29:3), a holy mountain (Ps. 2:6), a Holy Spirit (Ps. 51:11), holy land (Ps. 78:54), holy attire (Ps. 96:9), a holy name (Ps. 103:1), a holy city (Is. 52:1), an holy arm (Is. 52:10), an holy allotment (Ezekiel 45:7), holy chambers (Ezekiel 46:19), a holy war (Mic. 3:5), holy meat (Hag. 2:12), an holy habitation (Zech. 2:13), holy messengers (Mark 8:38), holy prophets (Lk. 1:70), holy offspring (Lk. 1:35), a holy kiss (1 Cor. 16:20), holy hands (1 Timothy 2:8), a holy calling (2 Timothy 1:9), holy brethren (Hebrews 3:1), and a holy commandment (2 Peter 2:21).

² John MacArthur wrote, "The concept of sanctification, setting things apart to God, is one of the oldest in Scripture. In Genesis 2:3 God Himself sanctified the seventh day and rested from His creative work. Job regularly made burnt offerings to God and consecrated his sons to Him (Job 1:5). At the Exodus, God set apart the firstborn of His people and their animals for His use (Exodus 13:1-2). Just prior to God's giving Moses the Ten Commandments, He set apart Israel as a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6; cf. Ezek. 37:28) and a few days later sanctified Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:23), having already forbidden the Israelites from coming too near it (v. 12). Later in the wilderness, the Lord sanctified Aaron and his sons for the priestly office (Exodus 28:41 ff.) and set apart the tabernacle and its vessels for sacred purposes (chaps. 30-31; 35-40). Samuel sanctified Jesse and his son David (1 Sam. 16:5, 12-13). Many years later God sanctified the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 7:16). Before the prophet Jeremiah was even born, God set him apart for prophetic ministry (Jer. 1:5). ¶ New Testament narratives also contain examples of God's special sanctifying work. He set apart John the Baptist to be the forerunner of Jesus Christ (Luke 1:13-17). God the Father also set apart His Son the Messiah for the work of redemption (Matt. 1:20-23; Luke 1:31-33; cf. 2:29-35; Matt. 3:13-17; Acts 2:22-24). Jesus set apart the twelve apostles from the larger number of disciples who followed Him (Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). The early church set apart for divine service the first deacons (Acts 6:1-6) and some for missionary service (13:1-3)." (1 & 2 Thessalonians, MNTC, p. 202)

³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, Vol. IV, p. 38.

⁴ It is as he prayed in 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13: "And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men, just as we also *do* for you [this is our first point this morning]; so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father [once again, the bible views us as an offering that will be presented to God...] at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints."

⁵ This no doubt is by Paul ends so many of his letters referencing this peace, cf. Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:16.