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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HOLY EMBODIMENT”
First Thessalonians 3:11-4:12

☑ Nervous speakers are often advised to picture the audience in their underwear. Rarely am I ill-at-ease in front of a group, and when I am I do not use that technique. You are safe with me!

But *this* might be awkward: picture *yourself* in front of a full-length mirror wearing only undergarments. Or, if you are brave enough, without any clothing whatsoever.

How would you describe what you see? What adjectives come to mind? Which parts do you like? Are there some you cannot bear to look at?

Now, reflect on your body's *functionality*. You have eleven intricate systems of amazing organs that enable breath, circulation, digestion, thought, and so forth.

Are your systems working well at the moment? Does your body do what you need it to do? How about what you *want* it to do? Is its performance a source of confidence, satisfaction, ambivalence, frustration, disgust?

Now, contemplate your body's sheer *corporeality*. It is visible, hearable, touchable, and sometimes smell-able.

What do you know of the Creation, except through your senses of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell? How do you interact with other people, if not by physical means? What self-awareness do you have, what conscious identity, aside from your material form?

Consider the appearance, functionality, and corporeality of your body. You are not *only* your body; yet for better and for worse, you *are* your body.

A child who is just beginning to discover what astonishing feats his or her body can do delights in their physicality. So does the young person who is at peak operating condition. Meanwhile, those of us who are a bit older, and those who struggle with disease or disability, are predisposed to be more ambivalent.

To be sure, our bodies are **“fearfully and wonderfully made”** (Psalm 139:14). Yet they will **“waste away like something rotten, like a garment eaten by moths”** (Job 13:28).

Decay leading to death is not the only problem. Wouldn't my study, prayer, and worship be more fruitful if my neck didn't itch and my ears didn't pick up every little noise and I didn't feel antsy? Wouldn't my knowledge would be clearer and my faith stronger if I could see past this dimension?

And is there anyone whose body is not complicit in much of their sin? Sexual impurity is only the tip of the iceberg. There is also greed, covetousness, materialism, false pride of appearance and physical capability, and much more.

‡ What purpose does the Creator have for our bodies? Can a body be anything more than a useful tool? Is it possible to have a joyful, satisfying relationship with one's body?

■ Please turn to First Thessalonians 4:7: **“God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”**

📖 The adjective “**holy**” is slipperier than some suppose. The basic idea is simple enough: “**holy**” people and “**holy**” things are ‘*distinct*,’ they are ‘*set apart from that which is common or profane*,’ hence they are ‘*sacred*.’

{Is 6:3} Yet the reality to which “**holy**” refers is so immense and mysterious it cannot be fully expressed in words. The origin of this reality is LORD YHWH himself. He evokes awe and reverent fear because he is “**Holy, holy, holy.**” (That repetition suggests that holiness isn’t just one of his attributes; it is the essence of his being.)

It follows that to be “**holy**” is to share in the life and presence of the Awesome Other. “**To live a holy life**” is to reflect the nature of the Living God in word and deed.

This has enormous implications for what holiness is not. Living a holy life is not a matter of adhering to a list of ‘do’s and don’ts.’ Obedience to the Law is a holy act insofar as it is a fruit of God’s presence and draws us deeper into his life. But when it hinges on human effort it alienates us from God and becomes a source of unholiness and death.

{Mt 23:27-28} The Pharisees are a case in point. They followed God’s Law to the letter, with fanatical scrupulosity; yet as a group they were not holy. Jesus called them whitewashed tombs that have a beautiful appearance but on the inside “**are full of... wickedness**” and “**everything unclean.**”

■ “**God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life**” (First Thessalonians 4:7).

★ What purpose does the Creator have for these bodies? That we share in his life and presence, reflecting his divine nature in our action and being.

★ {1 Co 3:16} Can a human body be anything more than a useful tool? Yes! It can be “**God’s [sacred] temple**” in which dwells the Spirit of God.

★ {Ps 16:11} Is it possible to have a joyful, satisfying relationship with one’s body? Yes! The LORD “**fills [us] with joy in [his] presence,**” and he is present in the bodies of his holy people.

I mean literal flesh and blood and bone. This involves material, corporeal bodies.

It did not have to be this way. God is infinitely creative. He could have made us ethereal entities unaffected by hunger, thirst, and fatigue. He could have made us super-spirits who are incapable of sinning.

{Ge 2:7; 1:31} Instead, YHWH “**formed Adam from the dust.**” The Creator designed our species to need food, drink, and sleep. He knew Adam and his descendants would submit their bodies to sin and death – and still he saw that it “**was very good.**”

★ In short, Holy God does not intend us to be holy *in spite of* our physicality. **His purpose is for us to “live a holy life” in, through, and by means of our bodies!**

Does this sound strange? Is it difficult to accept?

Many in the Church are convinced – and some explicitly teach – that corporeality does not merely expose us to problems – it *is* the problem. To them the human body is at best a useful tool, but more realistically a “necessary evil.”

Their error – heresy, even – is inflicting grievous injury on the Body of Christ. How many Christians give up on holiness altogether and blame it on their bodies? How many assume that holiness is unattainable so long as they are “stuck” with flesh and blood and bone?

And yet God calls us **“to live a holy life.”** Not someday in the distant future, *now*. Not in heaven, far, far away, *here*. Not in an intangible, spiritual sense, *physically*. It cannot be otherwise, for although we are not *only* our bodies, still we are our bodies. God has bestowed them on us for his glory and our blessing.

◆ **“Live a holy life”** applies to all we do, but there are two special areas in which God’s holiness can shine brightest in, through, and by means of our bodies: sexual conduct and personal relationships.

{Ex 20:14; I Co 10:8} We often frame sexual holiness in negative terms: **“You shall not commit adultery,” “We should not commit sexual immorality,”** etc. In a licentious world, prohibition is necessary.

But Scripture does not stop there; nor, for that matter, does it start there. God’s first command regarding sex – which also happens to be his very first command to humankind, whatsoever – is positive: **“Be fruitful and increase in number”** (Genesis 1:28).

■ Here in First Thessalonians Paul leads with the positive, and rounds it out with the negative. Verse 3a: **“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified”** (made holy like Jesus) – that’s positive; then 3b: **“that you should avoid sexual immorality”** – that’s negative.

■ Again, verse 4: **“each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and**

honorable” – that is positive; then verse 5: **“not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God”** – that is negative.

■ In verse 6 Paul breaks the pattern and strengthens the prohibition: **“in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister.”**

{I Co 6:19-20} Sanctified sexuality is not about obeying the rules. It is sharing in God’s life and presence as we reflect his nature in, through, and by means of our bodies. **“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? Therefore honor God with your bodies.”**

■ **“God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life,”** verse 7. This is the hinge verse in today’s text. It applies not only to sexual conduct, as we have just seen, but also to non-sexual personal relationships.

■ In verses 9-10 Paul focuses on holy relationships inside the church: **“About your love for one another we do not need to write... for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, dear friends, to do so more and more.”**

Holiness and love are not in conflict in God or in human beings; to the contrary, they are interdependent. The holier I become, the better I love God; the better I love God, the holier I become.

{| Jn 4:20} Holy love for God demands holy love for other people, above all fellow Christ Followers. **“If we say we love God yet [fail to love] a brother or sister, we are liars. ...if we do not love a fellow believer, whom we have seen, we cannot love God, whom we have not seen.”**

Since you are not an abstraction, I must love you not only as a “soul,” but as a whole person with a material body. My love is real when it takes form in audible words and observable actions. Physical deeds of *αγαπη* [agapē] love are part and parcel of **“a holy life.”**

- In verses 11-12 Paul briefly addresses the issue of external relationships: **“make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands....”**

This is not an excuse to be aloof or withdrawn. It is a call to be humble and non-intrusive.

Leading **“a quiet life”** is not the only way we should express holy love for outsiders. But in light of the fact that Christians in the U.S. are increasingly viewed as strident, judgmental meddlers who demand special treatment, it is high time that we revisited this teaching.

- **“God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”** Not only in our spirits, not only in our souls, but in, through and by means of our bodies.

- In closing, I offer as a prayer and blessing the words of 3:12-13: **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so**

that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”

This is the Word of the Lord.