

1 Thess 5:22--The Sin-Sniffer's Catch-All Verse: "Avoid Every Appearance of Evil"

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This is one of several occasional essays on "Scripture Twisting." The purpose of these very brief essays is to challenge certain popular interpretations of the Bible that really have little or no basis.

I attended a Christian liberal arts college. The students there had scores of little oral traditions that helped them obey God. My wife and I still joke about them. Our favorite was this: "You should pray over a meal if it cost more than 50 cents or if you have to eat it with a fork." Where is that in the Bible? No place, of course, but we students felt that it was a necessary add-on for our sanctification.

You, too, have probably been exposed to such oral traditions. Over the years we have seen various essays and heard far too many sermons that extol the virtues of avoiding the appearance of evil. I remember growing up in a church in which the pastor would frequently preach on the evils of going to movies, or dancing, or drinking and smoking. Nowadays, such sermons are usually passé. Instead, there are laundry lists that ask various questions about an activity such as "Is it honoring to God? Might it harm a weaker brother or sister? Is it the best use of your time? Does it promote the cause of Christ? Does it avoid the appearance of evil?"

Such lists usually address activities that are considered "grey areas" for a believer's ethical and moral stance. Thus, the Bible does not explicitly forbid them. Perhaps originally these checklists were designed to cause one to pause and reflect on an activity before following one's own conscience in the matter. But, as is often the case, they have become a way of imposing one's own conscience on another. In effect, they are oral tradition that is extra-biblical, palmed off as though a mark of wisdom and maturity. In other words, they are often a weaker brother's attempt to enforce a kind of legalism on those who have fewer scruples about such grey areas.

The net effect of such lists is to cast the Christian faith in a negative light and to paralyze the saints from becoming involved in people's lives. Now please don't misunderstand: I am not advocating that one ought to *live* in the grey areas! Anything in excess (except worship of God, which, in reality can't be in excess) is to be avoided. For example, I like chocolate. A lot. I find nothing in Scripture that says I should avoid chocolate at all costs. Indeed, 1 Tim 4:4 seems to imply that I have personal freedom in this matter: "Everything created by God is good; and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." But what if I eat a pound of chocolate a day? Besides the fact that my teeth will rot and I'll soon look like a blimp, such an activity would begin to control my life. I would become enslaved to it. "Whatever overcomes a man, to that he

is enslaved" (2 Pet 2:19). Eating chocolate is OK; devouring the stuff till it devours me is not.

I am not talking about excess in the grey areas; I am addressing rather the occasional forays into them. The issues here are much larger than can be addressed in a short essay. Suffice it to say here that those who do not want other Christians to enjoy life use 1 Thess 5:22 as their ultimate weapon. This text reads in the *King James Version*, "Avoid every appearance of evil." It is the sin-sniffer's catch-all verse.

Let's briefly examine it. First, the *KJV* translation is hardly the best translation. Virtually all modern translations have something like: "Abstain from every form of evil." But form is not necessarily the same as appearance. A form can have a correspondence to reality. Significantly, the noun εἶδος (used in this verse) is sometimes translated "mint." Along these lines, what is interesting to note is that in the early church, the wording of 1 Thess 5:21 was more often attributed to Jesus than to Paul. And it was prefaced by the words "become approved money-changers." This then was followed by the participial construction, "by abstaining from evil things and by holding fast to the good."¹ Thus, Paul may well be quoting from a previously unrecorded saying of Jesus in 1 Thess 5:21-22. If so, then these verses need to be rendered as follows: "Test all things; hold fast to the good, but abstain from every false coinage." The idea then is that believers ought to stay away from that which is *counterfeit*--that is, *false doctrines*.

This interpretation is confirmed in the overall context: in vv 19-20 Paul gives the pithy instruction: "Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances." This is followed by a contrastive *dev* ("but") that leads off v 21: "*but* test all things." Clearly, the context has to do with exercising discernment when it comes to spiritual instruction. The Thessalonians are instructed to heed the Spirit's guidance and listen to the words of prophets. At the same time, they are not to accept everything gullibly, but are to "test all things." They should then keep the good and throw out the bad. Thus, v 22 has the idea of "stay away from bad doctrine." The instruction in vv 19-22, then, has nothing to do with lifestyle *per se*.

A second argument is necessary. Suppose that our interpretation of these verses is wrong. Suppose that counterfeiting coins is not in the background of 1 Thess 5:22. If so, does this necessarily mean that believers are to avoid every appearance of evil? Not at all. In order for that to be the meaning, three other things must line up: (1) "form" must lack correspondence to reality (like the word "appearance" seems to do in the *KJV* translation); (2) v 22 must be interpreted in isolation from vv 19-21; and (3) we would expect to see examples, in the life of Paul and others in the NT, of avoiding the appearance of evil.

¹ γίνεσθε δοκίμοι τραπεζίται, τα; με;ν ἀποδοκίμαζοντε", το; δε; καλο;ν κἀτεροντε": "become approved money-changers, by abstaining from evil things, and by holding fast to the good." For an accessible discussion, see *TDNT* 2.373-75, especially 375 (article on εἶδος" by Kittel).

Although a case could be made for the first and second points (eìdo" sometimes lacks correspondence with reality;² the lack of a conjunction at the beginning of v 22 *might* mean that there is no connection with the preceding³), the third point fails miserably. Paul was noted for becoming all things to all men (1 Cor 9:20-22) for the sake of the gospel. He *often* did things that certain sin-sniffers viewed as lacking propriety (cf. Gal 2). But he did them both because of his passion for the gospel and because of "our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus" (Gal 2:4).

But Paul is not the supreme example of one who did not avoid the appearance of evil. Jesus is. He spent so much time with tax-collectors and sinners that he was labeled a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Indeed, his very first miracle was to change water into wine (John 2), enabling the festivities to keep going. The distinct impression one gets from the Gospels is that Jesus simply did not have the same scruples about his associations that the religious leaders of the day had. They avoided the appearance of evil at all costs; Jesus seems almost to have had the opposite approach to life and ministry (cf., e.g., Luke 7:39). Even his disciples had been oppressed by all the rules and traditions of men. But Jesus freed them from such nonsense. In Matt 15, the Pharisees were stunned that Jesus' disciples did not perform the Jewish hand washing ritual before they ate. They hammered on the disciples and on Jesus for not obeying the oral commandments. Jesus did not say, "Sorry, boys. I didn't mean to cause offense. It won't happen again." Instead, he very boldly pointed out that these religious leaders had exchanged the laws of God for their own self-made rules. He called them hypocrites who had no heart for God. The most remarkable verse in this whole pericope is verse 12: Jesus' disciples came to their Master and said, "Did you know that the Pharisees were offended by what you just said?" Didn't they know that offending the Pharisees was part of Jesus' job description!

It is evident that our Lord enjoyed life and enjoyed it fully (cf. Luke 5:29-34). Restoring the *Imago Dei* to the way God intended it leads to such enjoyment of life. It is no wonder that Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:30), and "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Oral

² Even here, however, one must assume that *lifestyle* is meant. In our interpretation, "false coinage" is the meaning of "form of evil." Thus, there is a lack of correspondence to truth. It is a subtle yet important distinction to note whether "good" and "bad" are speaking in the moral realm or in the mental realm, the realm of love or the realm of truth. I take it that the latter is the meaning of the text.

³ Formally known as asyndeton (i.e., lack of connection), such constructions are used for a variety of purposes in the NT. Not the least of these is to *heighten* the emphasis of the implicit connection. For example, in Phil 4:5 Paul says, "Let your forbearance be known to all men. The Lord is near." Surely there is a connection between the two halves of this verse! People should see our lives so as to become born again—while there is still time. In Eph 4:4-5, after Paul had just instructed the Ephesians about maintaining the unity of the Spirit, he says, "[There is] one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Is there no connection between vv 1-3 and vv 4-6? On the contrary, vv 4-6 offer the theological basis and pattern for what Christian unity should be like. In 2 Tim 3:16, Paul reminds Timothy that "Every Scripture is inspired and profitable." Such a solemn statement surely has a connection with v 15: "You have been acquainted with the sacred writings from your childhood." Thus, asyndeton does not necessarily or even normally imply no connection. Often, it is used to heighten the connection with what was previously mentioned. We believe that that is the case in 1 Thess 5:19-22 as well.

traditions that heap requirements on people because of some outspoken individual's overbearing conscience are an anathema to the Lord and to the evangelical faith. May ours be, once again, a robust faith and a life of enjoyment of God and of the good gifts he bestows on us.

In conclusion, 1 Thess 5:22 is apparently talking about staying away from false *teaching* and has nothing to do with lifestyle per se. It should be translated, "Abstain from every form of evil" or "Abstain from every false coinage [i.e., false doctrine]." Further, to wield it as a weapon of legalism is against the general tenor of the New Testament and of the Lord's life in particular. Ironically, to avoid every appearance of evil is far more in keeping with the *Pharisees'* model of righteousness than with Jesus! The Westminster Shorter Catechism starts off by noting that the chief end of man is to "Glorify God and enjoy him forever." This capsulizes God's goal for humanity well. We must not forget that there are *two* verbs in this brief answer.

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