

# *Abstain from All Appearance of Evil*

## A Misunderstood Verse – A Freedom Robber!

Jeff Bowman

**V**ears ago in my first church Judy and I went to the movies. As we dropped off our then infant son at the home of one of the church members we were asked, “Where are you going tonight?” We replied happily, “To see a movie.” At that point we knew we said something that we shouldn’t have said. There was a disappointment on their face that their pastor was going to the movies. Later it was said that they don’t go to movies because it has the “*appearance of evil*.” In my life up to that point I had never had a problem with going to see a show but now I did – thanks to them!

What does the verse mean, “*Abstain from all appearance of evil*”? (I Thessalonians 5:22).

Since that dreadful movie day I’ve heard this verse quoted to prevent Christian freedoms more than any other verse. I’ve seen it quoted against simple things like beards on men (“you know that men who wear beards are evil”), to a woman’s style of dress (“good Christian women do not wear pants to church, we are to avoid the appearance of evil”).

I’ve come to see that this little verse has become one of two large buckets for condemning something or someone that the “legalist” doesn’t like, the other being the “stumbling block” bucket! Both buckets are sweeping type statements that might be meant to help the fellow Christian but in actuality they squelch Christian freedom and ultimately evangelism. They are used when the legalist has not found a definitive Biblical response. They then say something like, “God wants us to avoid all appearance of evil in our lives.” So it is time we examine this misused verse to see if that is what God really is saying.

After our encounter with our church member who had a problem with us going to the movies, I was driven to examine the passage that was quoted. On the surface it looked very clear: “*Abstain from all appearance of evil*” (I Thessalonians 5:22). But as I looked at the context I realized that there was more to it than simply not doing something that someone might find

questionable. At the time I had picked up a wonderful book by Joseph C. Aldrich entitled *Life-Style Evangelism*. In it he addressed this very verse in a chapter called “Avoid Evil Instead of Its Appearance.” He says the following:

In the Thessalonians passage quotes, Paul is talking about prophetic utterances in the previous verses (19-21). “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” What is to be tested? The content of every prophetic utterance. What is good is to be held on to; what is evil is to be rejected. The passage is not saying never do something which looks like sin to another person. Jesus Christ frequently offended the leaders of the religious community.<sup>1</sup>

Aldrich pointed me in the direction of the context of the passage and to allow the context to dictate what the verse was saying. Let’s see the verse in its context:

*Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil (I Thessalonians 5:19-22).*

In the text the Apostle Paul is telling them to allow prophetic revelations of the Spirit, test the utterances, keep what is good and abstain from those that appear bad. It is that simple. Paul is not telling them to avoid actions that might look bad to someone else as many say today.

So what do other Biblical Scholars and commentaries say?

Here are a few.

William Hendriksen says regarding verses 19-22:

The reason for this disparagement of prophetic utterance can readily be surmised. Wherever God plants wheat, Satan sows his tares ... Paul, therefore, states what course of action the congregation should take: “Prophetic utterances do not despise, but test all things.” ... Once a true verdict has been reached, the practical rule must apply: “to the good hold on; from every form of evil hold off.”<sup>2</sup>

The Expositors Bible Commentary:

From Paul’s next prohibition, “Do not treat prophecies with contempt,” it appears that the Christians at Thessalonica like those at Corinth (I Corinthians 14:1) had underrated the gift of prophecy ... Apparently, however, certain “idle” brothers (:14; c.f. 4:11-12) had misused this gift by falsifying data regarding the Lord’s return. This had soured the remainder of the flock against prophecy in general ... Paul stipulates that all ... manifestations be tested with a view to accepting what is valid and disallowing what is not (:21-21) ... Allowance must

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1. Aldrich, Joseph C., *Lifestyle Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1981), p. 48.
  2. Hendriksen, William, *New Testament Commentary, 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), pp. 140.

also be made for professed spiritual manifestations that do not contribute but rather detract from the development of the local body ... “Hold fast” to the good, but “hold yourselves free from” every kind of evil that tries to parade as a genuine representation of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Hogg and Vine state:

... But if, on being tested, the tongue, prophesying or teaching, was not approved, the saints were to turn away therefrom.<sup>4</sup>

And lastly, New Testament Greek Scholar A.T. Robertson in summary says:

Abstain from every form of evil ... Evil had a way of showing itself even in the spiritual gifts, including prophecy.<sup>5</sup>

So why have Christians misused this passage? I think it is their failure to get the context. I know it was mine! Yet once the context is read we can see what Paul was saying and it isn't that we avoid “questionable” behavior.

The problem with saying that Christians should avoid “questionable behavior” is that we have all kinds of opinions as to what is or is not questionable behavior. Obviously we are not talking about *sin* or wrongs as described and given by God. We most definitely are to avoid disobeying God. But when it comes down to matters of Christian freedom and liberty then this misapplication of I Thessalonians 5:22 must be challenged. I might not like what you do but if it isn't sin I should keep my mouth shut and allow you to enjoy your freedom in Christ. It is amusing to me, now that I've been a believer for over 30 years, how many things I've seen be “evil” to one generation of believers are not to the next. I can remember when guitars (even acoustic) were said to have the appearance of evil. Drums were not allowed in church, then they became allowed in Sunday night services and now they are found in the morning service of every growing church!

Were these things really evil? Not to God! The sad thing is that today's young Christians, who do things once taboo by the older generation, still find “*the appearance of evil*” in things that are pure and of no consequence to God.

So you might disagree with your fellow Christian who likes to dance, smoke cigars, has tattoos, enjoys a glass of wine or a beer for dinner, has piercings, or even drives a nice car (and “yes” I've heard this verse quoted in regards to the type of car one drives!), but you'll not find God saying in this verse to avoid such liberties because they have the appearance of evil. The verse isn't saying that!

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3. *Expositors Bible Commentary, Volume 11, Thomas, Robert L. “1 Thessalonians” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1978), pp. 292-293.*

4. *Hogg, C.F. and Vine, W.E., The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians (Glasgow: Pickering & Inglis, 1914), pp. 200.*

5. *Robertson, A.T., Word Pictures in the New Testament – Vol. 4, The Epistles of Paul (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), p. 38.*

Your actions and life choices are either *evil* or they are not. If what you do is *evil* then *don't* do it! If it isn't then you have the freedom to do it or not, it is up to you – even if others think it “looks bad!” You may be misunderstood by the legalists but you'll be in good company – Jesus looked bad to the religious people of His day.

*Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled* (Titus 1:15).

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