

Abstain from Every Form of Evil

By Patrick Swayne

Paul provides two practical follow-up commands to his command to “test all things.” In addition to encouraging Christians to “hold fast what is good,” he tells them to “abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). But what does it mean to abstain from every form of evil? This verse, especially the way it reads in the KJV (“abstain from all appearance of evil”), has often been taken out of its context. As happens with all verses taken out of context, it has been applied to a number of things and situations which Paul did not intend, some of which run contrary to the Bible’s teaching elsewhere. In order to properly fulfill this command, Christians must know what the phrase doesn’t mean, what it means, and how it applies.

Abstaining from every form of evil does not require us to cut off all association with the world. Paul’s words elsewhere remind us that while there may come a time to cut off friendly associations with brethren, this requirement doesn’t apply to people in the world: “I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world” (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). It is impossible for Christians to cut themselves off completely from the world – and to do so would be to ignore the great commission given to all Christians (Matthew 28:18-20).

It also does not mean that we should avoid doing things simply because someone might take them the wrong way. Christ Himself came to seek and to save that which was lost, and in doing so He associated and even ate with “publicans and sinners” (Luke 19:10; Mark 2:16). It appeared evil to the Pharisees for Christ to associate with these kinds of people. However, to neglect them then and to neglect similar people today would be to neglect souls in dire need of salvation. “I came not to call the righteous,” Jesus said, “but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

Abstaining from the appearance of evil must be understood in the light of its context. The Thessalonians were quenching the Spirit and despising prophecies. False teaching, as stated in previous weeks, had turned them against all teaching. This was neither God’s plan nor His desire for them. Instead, they were to test what they heard by the divine standard, cleave to what was good, and, as the scripture plainly states, abstain from what was evil. In doing this, they could both protect and strengthen their minds with the knowledge from above and avoid the influence and snares from below.

The application of this principle is great. Christians need to be people of the book, constantly measuring what they hear in spiritual matters by the standard of the Bible. When such is contrary to the Bible, it is the duty of Christians to reject the false material and if necessary the false teacher who teaches it (Titus 3:10). To put Paul’s statement bluntly, Christians must not play with the fire of error; to do so will always result in getting burned, perhaps for eternity. Though it is not the first teaching of the text, by extension the text can also apply to avoiding any undue temptation – when evil surfaces in a situation, run away. Christians are told to flee from all kinds of tempting situations (1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22).

Some thoughts to consider: When you hear a sermon, do you listen carefully, take notes, and follow along and compare what you hear with what your Bible says? When a

friend tells you about the beliefs of the congregation or denomination that he attends, do you examine these beliefs to see if they are Bible based? If we accept all that we hear from the world in the name of religion and the Bible, then we must not be surprised when there is no Bible in our religion! God gave us a standard by which to measure and judge things; if we do not use it, we cannot abstain from every form of evil.