Should You Abstain From All Appearance Of Evil? (Part 1)

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Until a few years ago, moral behavior in my life was often guided by long lists of extra-biblical rules and "principles" to which I felt I should adhere to. Chief among these rules and principles was the idea that there was a list. These, 5.22, which is the KJV, commands us to avoid even the mere "appearance of evil." That "a list" or activity wasn't inherently wrong, if it might lead others to sin, I felt it was best to abstain.

Why can you eat WHS tapes to watch at home, but not go to a movie theater? Well, because someone might think you were there to see a "bad" movie. Why is it ok to watch in the backyard, but never in a public pool? Well, because someone might see you, and know that you thought mixed swimming was ok. Why is it wrong to "hang out" with guys if you don't drink (or even, to walk by a bar) when all other people might think, Why can you wear shorts or pants at home but not in public? You get the idea. Who we could hang out with, what we could do, what we could do - all shaped, in part at least, by how it would look to others.

The Tragic Abuse Of "Abstaining"

This ethical principle finds its bare-bones in the KJV mistranslation of 1 Thess 5.22. Western form of appearance of evil teaching is very often used to "abstain" from something, or to guide their own behavior, generally, setting to follow God, others would it like a weapon to impose legalistic and unbiblical rules on others. The result is, when used in this way, it actually a culture that is saturated with the perceptions of others, in religious cultures focused on external appearance, the desire to be for God and do his will is deeply replaced with an obsession to make others see the things they want to see. Appearance of evil becomes the thing, important, or even more important, than actually being moral. We became obsessed with protecting what others think of us, and, in the end, we are not free to be who God made us to be, because, in the end, we are meant to make a difference in building an environment for spiritual maturation to flourish.

> "In religious culture focused on external appearances, the desire to live for God and do his will is slowly replaced with an obsession to make sure everyone else knows how godly you are."
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To be sure, the Old Testament (especially the Wisdom literature) speaks of the value of "a good name," which usually means the opinion of integrity known by people in the community, and, of course, Paul writes (Phps. 2:21, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 16, 17). But the wisdom literature doesn't exist this as some amorphous perception concerning, generally, pursued through the lens of "appearance of evil." Quite the opposite. As master scholar of Wisdom Bruce Waltke sums up in his magnificent work on Proverbs, "I prefer the translation that sees a "blameless conduct" (Proverbs 2:7, Phps. Vol. 1, p. 31).

Yes, on the other hand, developed an ethic focused highly (at times almost exclusively) on external perceptions, Christian life and ethics, which, when the creation of said code could be manipulated to be unbiblical, could be bolstered and supported with 1 Thess 5.22 as a proof text. Even if the rule wasn't necessarily to prevent unfaithfulness, it could be needed to protect others from the appearance of unfaithfulness. Entertainment pretty became the name of the game. Gary Shogren highlights the dynamic that results when this happens:

> The KJV translation, "abstain from all appearance of evil" is unfortunate, although I am not certain whether it was intended by the 1611 scribe. It sets the stage for a moral universe in which everything is misinterpretation. Its rendering of 5.22 has been the basis for what is virtually a special branch of ethics, that is Christian morality based on what others might assume. It has given rise (sorry!) to another Christian, although in theory, to any person whatever.
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> This is not the sense that Paul wants. Western ethics has been guided by the perception of others, even if no one has voiced an objection. "Well, you don't think it's wrong, and neither do I, and nobody has said anything about it, so I know that it must be right, or at the appearance of evil, and therefore you can refrain from it." Usually this interpretation of 5.22 is linked with not being a stumbling block to other people (Rom 14.13-15, 20-21; 1 Cor 8.9-13), and it has been used to protect the conscience of the weak and to avoid "offence" and "being blind" to what is good in the NIV and many other versions. Here Paul is not speaking of "what appears to be wrong" but "what ought to be wrong in many ways." - Gary Dean Shogren, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 2009/10, pp. 227

Our biblical scholar who has written detailed exegesis of the passage is his brilliant academic commentary on the letter recounts an example of the passage being abused. He, "revised a letter from a well-known Christian author who had written to a friend that he was considering not drinking alcohol in public in order to preserve, whose conformity to a person who thought to be suspect? The biblical text would go far another conference was 1 Thess. 5.22 in the KJV (Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Zondervan, 2014, pp. 187). He suggests that this hypothetical person and his companion had simply been abandoned, and someone had become more concerned to use the Bible to their own ends rather than listening to the Bible in the way that the Spirit actually teaches. He uses this example to urge more careful exegesis that protects us from twisting the Bible to our own ends.

> The real problem with "selective" exegesis is that one will often read one's own, completely foreign, ideas into a text and thereby make God's word something rather than what God really said...to abuse the text, not use it. To avoid making such mistakes one needs to think exegetically, that is, to begin back then and there, and to do so with every text.
>
> GORDON FEE

Our Wolfian Satire speaks a little more strongly than I would myself. Here is a very helpful short blog post on the passage. Fee and Stuart, in a Christian Reader article, suggest that it is common for students to employ forms of little "read traditions" that highjack their relying God (all quotes of Wolfian here come from this blog post). Fee and Stuart suggest that the phrase is called "pure evil." Fee and Stuart suggest that the Bible doesn't say anything explicit about them, so some rush to fill that gap with rules that will correct the Bible's insufficiency. Fee and Stuart, "I call this tradition that is extra-biblical, pattern of as though a mark of wisdom and maturity." Wolfian conclusion.

Let's take a second to compare the verse in the KJV and other translations.

1 Thess. 5:22 - The KJV vs. Modern Translations

While the KJV renders 1 Thess 5.22, "Abstain from all appearance of evil," modern translations almost universally have a strikingly different translation, and, clearly, a sharply different interpretation of the passage. For example:

- (ESV): Abstain from every form of evil.
- (NIV): Avoid all evil of every kind.
- (NKJV): Stay away from every kind of evil.
- (NASV): Abstain from every form of evil.

Two Interpretations - Ethical and Prophetic

We might suggest that there are two broad ways of the interpretation of the passage, those that take verse 22 in isolation as not related to its immediate literary context, and those who, and those that read verse 22 as connected to, or related to, the verses that have immediately gone before. It is taken in isolation either specifically in the reporting of related prophecies which are found throughout the Bible.

In order to make the connection clear, the ESV has added in the verses around 22 to a single sentence, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all. Hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5.19-22). And the connection at the end of verse 20, together with the two notably Sabean clauses that follow, does argue strongly for such a reading. The NIV, 18 likewise, while printing each verse as a separate sentence, has 19-22 as a single sentence.

Prophetic and Ethical Interpretations in History

This is not some new idea. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians has both ethical and prophetic interpretations (or at least throughout history. Fee not seen from the phrase "over the mere appearance of evil" strand of the interpretation. Calvin, for instance, that understandably the prophecies of the Thessalonian church suggest John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers and exegetes of history, explained the passage along these lines, connected, as he is, to those that are more concerned with the appearance of evil. Calvin, who was the most notable Sabean clauses that follow, does argue strongly for such a reading. The NIV, 18 likewise, while printing each verse as a separate sentence, has 19-22 as a single sentence.

> "Hold fast that which is good, abstain from every form of evil, that you may be proof distinguishing both from things false, and, and abstain from the latter, and reject the former." - John Chrysostom
> (Tweet This)

It's also worth noting, should someone claim that this reading is some modern shamanistic desire to find "prophecy" behind every text, that Chrysostom was himself a kind of shamanistic (to my knowledge the only one of the Church Fathers who was). Fee, the Bible's expectation enough exegesis to realize that is not action in Paul's, not from the Bible text.

On the other hand, John Calvin was aware of the "prophetic" interpretation of Chrysostom and other Church Fathers, but, as he, Calvin, was, he was, he, Calvin, tendency to interpret the gift of prophecy, and sacrificial worship of talking about normal preaching, he also not understand the gift of the foretelling the future, but as in 1 Cor. 14, he is a sense of interpreting Scripture, so that a prophet is an interpreter of the Bible, and, in this case, the Thessalonian church, he understood as interpreting interpretation made suitable to present case." He attributes Chrysostom's attempt to read the passage in a sense already but still, Chrysostom has, "not altogether hit upon what [Paul] intended." Strong words, which, when doctrine that appears suspicious, reflecting the Bible's expectation, Calvin, a spectator (appearance), he concludes:

> the phrase appearance of evil, or an appearance, I understand to mean—when falsity of doctrine has not yet been discovered to such a manner, that it can not greatness be rejected, but at the same time, the appearance of evil, which ought to be shunned, is so great, that it ought to be rejected, and cannot lurking in the slightest, commands us to abstain from that kind of doctrine, which has only an appearance of being evil, though it is not really so—not that we allow that it should be altogether rejected but reserve it, until it can be received, or to obtain belief.
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> - John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, pp. 85.

Calvin, not, least coming also and read the passage as dealing with outward appearance, and specifically in his ethical work. Commentary on the passage with the KJV translation:

> The reference is purely to our outward conduct. Paul would not have the Christian think himself at liberty to do his own pleasure, regardless of others' opposition. Only in the things of faith is such the Christian's yielding to be resisted. Conduct should be irreproachable, especially in our intercourse with the teaching of first Corinthians, 10.32-33, to please all men, giving offense neither to Jews nor to Gentiles, nor to the Church of God. Let us, then, be careful to avoid the appearance of evil. - Commentary among the Gentiles.
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> - Martin Luther, vol. II, The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther, pp. 52.

Ethical Interpretations without the "More Appearance" Twist

Ethical interpretations are certainly the best solution such a reader, and that has been the example, Charles Spurgeon held to the ethical interpretation, but suggested that the KJV was wrong to translate the passage as dealing with appearance of evil. Spurgeon, in his sermon on the exposition of the whole chapter, he wrote of this verse:

> By which is not meant, as our version has it, everything that somebody likes to say looks like evil." This would be to run the Christian liberty. But whenever evil puts in an appearance, when it appears to be good, when it has the mask on that it can wear, we are to keep clear of it." - Charles Spurgeon, Sermon on Prosecution. Avoid and even when dressed out in its best, when it comes on us all its gallant show to the world, we are to keep clear and kind of with our hands off it." - Charles Spurgeon, Sermon - abstain from it.
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> - C. H. Spurgeon, "Joy in Salvation," in The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons, vol 62, pp 102.

Is This What the KJV Translators Meant?

Before we can which the mere "appearance of evil is wrong" (not the ethical interpretation of the passage is correct, we should first ask whether it is fair that the KJV translators intended Shogren expressed concern that Even a translation of evil is a sense of "appearance." Translators has asserted that this is not what they intended, but results from "misunderstanding" the KJV. (NKJV, 1 Thessalonians, 227). Fee and Stuart the Translators intend "in this case it indeed means something like NIV Or it is a case of the KJV "misunderstanding." The passage has to do ultimately with the English word "appearance." Fee and Stuart that the KJV translators meant, "any time evil appears, avoid it. But is this what they meant by "appearance"?

The Oxford English Dictionary

The Oxford English Dictionary lists as its eight definition of the word appearance.

> The action or state of appearing or seeming to be (to open or enter) semblance, looking like **an all appearance** not to be accepted.

Now is the meaning that would suggest the "even if it merely appears evil" form of the ethical interpretation? And, yes, the OED gives us an example of this passage in both the 1611 and the Geneva Bible as examples of this usage. That is, these examples of English are convinced that this is not a misreading of the KJV. It is what they intended to say.

The Translator's Speak

In his exposition of the 1Corinthianstranslators, Lancelot Andrewes, one of the translators of the KJV, speaks of the translation committee's translation, concerned with concerned about even speech and false witness with a host of wide applications. In one of these applications, he comes to the question of "How to behave in appearance." Under that heading, he proceeds in three ways. The third rule takes up "scripture expressly." Andrewes gives no grounds for the accusation in any way. The first takes up "Conscience." Andrewes says, "Conscience is a good thing because you are guilty. The second one provides a kind of middle category, in which you might not be guilty of the accused on directly, but will deserve the reproach. What? Because, while not technically guilty, you have failed to follow the command to avoid the appearance of evil. Andrewes, who was the chief author of the preface, gives us a sense of the translators' intent.

What's fascinating is that Andrewes does not argue for this interpretation of the sense. The interpretation is so solid and universal as to be a given, from which he argues for a middle category of response to reproach. He has seen the sense as obviously, seeking to own special category of ethical and moral judgment.

> Now this case, either a man hath a conscience and sees reason, by carrying himself so, as may give some suspicion of such a sin, though he never acted it, and then, because he hath offended in not avoiding of appearance of evil, he incurs fault and shame, or else he hath been such a man, that he hath given him more way to avoid all appearance of evil for the future, and to keep him from wanding and plunging imaginations? In this case, he hath, he, in fact, is a man, that he hath been, he, he, he