

The Appearance Of Evil

by David Padfield

“Do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:20-22)

THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE "some things hard to understand, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (1 Peter 3:16). Sometimes people "twist" the Scriptures because they have an evil heart and do not really care what God has said—they will twist the Scriptures to justify their own evil actions. Other people will unknowingly "twist" the Scriptures—usually as a result of a lack of Bible study.

If I were to make a list of the most abused (or "twisted") passages in the Bible, I think that 1 Thessalonians 5:22 would be near the head of the list. In the King James Version of the Bible this passage simply commands us to "abstain from all appearance of evil." This verse is explained by many folks to mean that if some act "appears" to be evil then we must abstain from it. Of course, the person explaining the passage gets to determine what "appears" evil and what doesn't. If they don't like going to the movie theater then you can't go either—it "appears" to be evil. If they don't like playing cards then you can't play either—it "appears" to be evil. If they don't like vanilla ice cream then you can't eat it either—it "appears" to be evil.

I have memories from Bible classes of my youth when other teenagers would ask questions about the morality of certain activities. Often a Bible class teacher would respond that the suggested activity was sinful because it "appeared" to be evil in the eyes of some folks. I am sure such teachers thought they had given a "Bible answer to a Bible question." After class the teenagers would often talk about the "profound" answer we had been given, then we tried to come up with a list of things that wouldn't appear evil to someone --- the list was mighty short.

I went to high school with several Mennonites and nearly everything I said or did "appeared" evil to them. My clothing was sinful because it wasn't black. I drove a car that had chrome bumpers and they considered that sinful because it was "too flash" (it's still hard for me to imagine a beat-up AMC Rambler as "flashy"). We used electricity in our house and that was considered a sin—it "appeared" to be evil. Conversation without using words like "Thee" and "Thou" was taboo—it "appeared" to be evil.

Maybe by now you can see the problem. It is hard to imagine *anything* that doesn't "appear" evil to someone! Worshipping God on the first day of the week "appears" to be evil to the Seventh Day Adventists. Referring to Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the Messiah "appears" to be evil to the Jews. Our disregard for the "Pope" appears to be evil to Catholics. Saluting the flag "appears" to be evil to Jehovah's Witnesses. Preaching on the

consequences of adultery "appears" to be evil to several "heretic finders" in the brotherhood.

The word translated as "appearance" in the King James Version is the Greek word *eidōs*. Concerning this verse MARVIN VINCENT wrote, "As commonly explained, abstain from everything that even *looks like* evil. But the word signifies *form* or *kind*... It never has the sense of *semblance*. Moreover, it is impossible to abstain from everything that looks like evil." (*Word Studies in The New Testament*, Vol. IV, pg. 51).

Translations of the Bible render this verse in a variety of ways. The New King James, Revised Standard, American Standard, New Revised Standard, New American Standard and Moulton translate this verse as "abstain from every form of evil." In similar fashion, the New International Version gives us, "avoid every kind of evil." Weymouth sounds a bit more formal with, "hold yourselves aloof from every form of evil." The Contemporary English Version, recently introduced by the American Bible Society, translates this verse as "don't have anything to do with evil."

IN HIS COMMENTARY ON FIRST Thessalonians, H. A. W. MEYER wrote: "But (1) *eidōs* never signifies appearance. (2) A distorted thought would arise. For as the apostle has required the holding fast not that which has the *appearance* of good, but that which is *actually* good; so also in ver. 22, on account of the close reference of *poneros* (evil, dp) to the preceding *kalon* (good, dp), the discourse must also be of an abstinence from that which is *actually* evil. (3) To preserve oneself from all appearance of evil is not within the power of man." (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Thessalonians*).

In his critical commentary on the *Greek New Testament*, HENRY ALFORD wrote: "These words cannot by any possibility be rendered as in E. V., 'abstain from all appearance of evil.'" For (1) *eidōs* never signifies appearance' in this sense: (2) the two members of the sentence would thus not be logically correspondent, but a new idea would be introduced in the second which has no place in the context: for it is not against being deceived by false appearance, nor against giving occasion by behavior which appears like evil, that he is cautioning them, but merely to distinguish and hold fast that which is good, and to reject that which is evil." (Alford's Greek Testament, Vol. III, pg. 281).

In 1891 Cambridge University published a series of commentaries on the New Testament under the title of *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*. In the volume *The Epistles To The Thessalonians*, GEORGE FINDLAY wrote: "The Apostle does not advise the Thessalonians to avoid what *looks like* evil; the command thus understood encourages the studying of appearances, and tends to the 'doing of our works to be seen by men' which our Lord condemns (Matt. xxiii. 5). But in completing on the negative side the previous command, 'hold fast the good (in prophesyings),' he gives to it the widest possible extension: 'Keep ourselves not only from this, but from *every sort of evil*.'" "

BY NOW WE CAN SEE THAT IN 1 Thessalonians 5:22 Paul is speaking about us abstaining from every manifestation and form of evil-he was not telling us to avoid things that simply *look like* evil to someone else (a rather arbitrary standard). Since this is the case, why do so many Christians twist this passage into meaning something Paul never intended? With many people I think you could blame laziness. Let me show you what I mean.

When a teenager asks what is wrong with going to the public beach, what do you tell them? You could tell them this practice "appears" evil in the sight of some and therefore they can't go. But friend, parading around half-naked at the beach is not wrong simply because it "appears" evil to someone else. It is wrong because of what the Lord taught on modesty (1 Timothy 2:9). It takes more time to explain what modest apparel is and how when a man "looks at a woman to lust for her (he) has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Sometimes parents are embarrassed to explain the affect our clothing (or lack thereof) might have on members of the opposite sex. So, instead of explaining lasciviousness and lust to their teenagers, they will talk about the "appearance" of evil. It usually does not take a teenager long to see through the diversion-they quickly see that the "appearance of evil" standard is arbitrary at best.

What is wrong with smoking a cigarette? I know it "appears" evil to some people-but I seriously doubt if one person in ten actually thinks it is "evil." If you are trying to discourage your children from smoking on the basis of its "appearance" you are wasting your time. Instead, talk with them about drug addiction --- something the Bible plainly condemns. Study what Paul said about "sorcery" in Galatians 5:20. "Sorcery" is from the Greek word *pharmakia*, from which we get the English word "pharmacy." It might take a bit longer to explain, but at least you will be on solid ground instead of trying to determine who might find the "appearance of evil" in smoking.

If your neighbor wants to know why you don't buy a lottery ticket you could reply, "Well, I know it appears to be evil to a lot of folks and so I can't purchase one." Have you ever considered that the purchase of that same ticket might "appear" to be a good thing to some people. Before introducing the lottery, most states had politicians telling us how much good was going to be done with the proceeds from the sale of lottery tickets --- they made it sound like buying a lottery ticket was the patriotic thing to do --- it would help the public schools and keep the taxes low. If you argue about the virtues of the lottery on the basis of its appearance, you have already lost the discussion. Instead of discussing the lottery (a topic the Bible does not mention), we need to discuss covetousness (a topic the Bible has a great deal to say about). Paul tells us to "put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). What is it that motivates people to buy a lottery ticket? If they really wanted to help the schools they would give the money directly. If they want to try and get "something for nothing" they will gamble on a lottery ticket.

Study and apply what the Bible actually says about morality instead of setting arbitrary standards.

