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Even the Appearance of Evil?

Jeff Miller

Like many in the Restoration Movement, I grew up not drinking alcohol. For what it's worth, I remain a teetotaler to this day, but not for precisely the same reasons. One reason impressed upon me by various preachers and teachers is that Christians should avoid the *appearance of evil*. That is, even if drinking alcohol is not itself a sin, the faithful Christian must nevertheless shun any appearance of sin lest the Church's reputation and witness suffer. To be clear, this article is not about alcohol; it's about the appearance-of-evil line of reasoning, which has been applied to numerous activities and is based on 1 Thessalonians 5.22. While most modern translations approximate the NIV's "reject every kind of evil," the King James Version says, "Abstain from all appearance of evil." The KJV's use of *appearance* has resulted in a certain understanding of this text, an understanding I believe to be wrong.

The word rendered "kind" or "appearance" is *eidōs*, a relatively generic word with the basic meaning "form" or "shape." It describes, for example, the pleasing form of certain persons.¹ It's not only humans that can have favorable *eidōs*, for the word helps describe the first seven of Pharaoh's visionary cows (Genesis 41) as well as the Spirit's dove-like descent upon Jesus at his baptism (Luke 3.22). The word can describe unpleasing form as well, as we see from Pharaoh's second set of seven cows and, more importantly, from the word's two occurrences in Isaiah 53.2, ". . . he had no *form* or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his *appearance* that we should desire him" (italics added).

Consider the English word *form* and it will become clear how the idea of shape comes to refer to a variety of occurrences. With essentially no effort we discern from context whether form refers to a distinctive shape or to distinctive characteristics. An example from the Old Testament demonstrates the shift of *eidōs* from *form* to *kind*: "I will send four kinds of destroyers against them," declares the LORD, "the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy" (Jeremiah 15.3 NIV, italics added). The Greek translator of Jeremiah says *forms* (*eidōs*) but means *kinds*.

Clearly, Paul uses *eidōs* in 1 Thessalonians 5.22 to refer to kinds, variations, occurrences of actual evil. In contrast, he is not speaking of the mere appearance of evil when no evil is actually present. Just as clearly, Jesus himself did not always avoid the appearance of evil. He was, for example, frequently found fellowshiping with sinners.²

When we are wrong about a biblical text, we cause two categories of problems. The first is the obvious: we believe and teach something the text does not say. Second, we miss what the text *does* say because our misunderstanding functions as a diversion from the truth. I believe both of these errors have long been at work regarding 1 Thessalonians 5.22.

1. Including Rachel (Gen 29.17), Joseph (Gen 39.6), David (1 Sam 16.18), Abigail (1 Sam 25.3), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11.2), Tamar (2 Sam 13.1), and Esther (Esth 2.7); see also Deut 21.11, Judg 13.6, and Song 5.15. These references are, of course, to the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

2. See, for example, Matt 9.10–13; 11.19; Mark 2.15–17; Luke 15.1–2.

The first category of error—believing and promoting what the text doesn't say—initially appears rather harmless here, for avoiding the appearance of evil indeed seems in line with biblical teaching and common sense. If God hates evil and calls us to do the same,³ then surely we should give it the widest berth possible.

Upon reflection, however, believing and promoting a faulty understanding of 1 Thessalonians 5.22 is more problematic than it at first may seem. While I am indeed pleased that my former understanding of this text has kept me out of a lot of trouble, I am also uncomfortably aware that such an understanding formed me into an appearance-of-evil detector. I remember with chagrin that day long ago when my family entered Pizza Hut and saw a pitcher of beer on the table where one of our congregation's deacons sat. I recall that I wasn't particularly concerned whether he was among those drinking it; the sin, rather, was simply the public proximity of the pitcher!

To put it bluntly, I was playing the Pharisee. One hallmark of Pharisaism is the constructing of fences around the Law. Scripture says not to work on the Sabbath, so the Pharisees said not to do anything that could remotely be called work. Scripture says not to misuse the name Yahweh, so the Pharisees didn't use it at all. Scripture says not to be a drunkard, so I said no beer at Pizza Hut.

And I'm not the only one. The following quotation, for example, is from a website with over 90,000 subscribers: "Paul says to *avoid even the appearance of evil*. That is how far we are supposed to stay away from it. Not just if we are doing evil or thinking evil, but even if somebody might come along and think that what we are doing is evil."⁴ Another website offers this closing prayer after a devotion on 1 Thessalonians 5.22: "Lord, teach me how to avoid even the appearance of evil in every area of my life. Guard me from having a too carefree or careless attitude about my appearance, my relationships, or my conduct."⁵ Notice the subtle yet significant change from "the appearance of evil" to "*even* the appearance of evil" in both quotations. The addition of *even* serves to strengthen the interpretation that this verse refers not to actual evil, but to what might be mistaken for evil.

In short, this text doesn't say that Christians should avoid activities that could be perceived as evil. In addition to promoting what the text doesn't say, a second problem with this faulty interpretation is missing what the text does say. Surely 1 Thessalonians 5.22 meant something in the first century and still has a contribution to make in the twenty-first.

Considering the context is essential and begins with the paragraph. Most English translations have verse 22 closing a paragraph, whether that paragraph begins at verse 12, 16, or 19. In any case, the preceding verses are a sequence of concisely stated ethical exhortations, and verse 22 sets this list off from the different function of the following verses. We can conclude, therefore, that "avoid every kind of evil" is Paul's way of clarifying that the kinds of evil in verses 12–21 (idleness, repaying evil with evil, quenching the Spirit, etc.) are not the only kinds. Paul's summary exhortation, "avoid every kind of evil," makes clear that his list is not exhaustive.

Broadening our scope from the paragraph to the letter, our brief verse fits well within the context of 1 Thessalonians as a whole. While Paul refers broadly to "every kind of evil," he presumably has certain kinds of evil in mind. One certainty is that he is concerned with the evil of sexual immorality. This topic is prominent in chapter 4, where we find avoidance language similar to 5.22, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality . . ." (4.3 NIV).

Expanding the context even further, 1 Thessalonians 5.22 reflects typical Pauline style. Paul frequently employs vice or virtue lists in his exhortation, and he has a tendency to end with a comment that extends the list beyond what is expressly mentioned. For example, when Paul refers to "such things" at the end of a sin list in Romans 1.32 and again after the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.23, he means "these things and others like them." Similarly, Paul's exhortation in Colossians 3 climaxes with the broadening appeal of verse 17, "And

3. See, for example, Psalm 97.10, Proverbs 8.13, Amos 5.15, and Zechariah 8.17.

4. <http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Topical.show/RTD/cgg/ID/3085/Avoiding-Appearance-of-Evil.htm>. Italics original.

5. <http://www.jesusfreakhideout.com/devotionals/theappearanceofevil.asp>.

whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

This emphasis on word and deed nudges us back to the context of 1 Thessalonians 5. The exhortation culminating in verse 22 concerns both speech (warn, encourage, praise, pray, thank) and action (live, strive, test, hold on). Thus the paragraph’s concluding comment is an appeal to consider both words and deeds, for the ever-changing demands of daily life require ever-expanding application of Paul’s exhortations.

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