**1 Thessalonians 5:19-22**

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**Cling To What Is Good—Avoid Every Form of Evil**

***19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.***

* In my message last week we had an opportunity to put into practice the command that Paul gives to the Thessalonian brethren to ***examine everything carefully***.
* Just as the Thessalonians were dealing with false teaching that had entered their church regarding **the coming of the day of the Lord**, so we, in our day, are dealing with the false teaching of **the social gospel**, which is attempting to encroach into the 21st century church.
* As we saw last week, when a teaching is **tested** properly . . . compared with the truth taught in the Bible . . . we can determine if a teaching is in conformity with God’s word or whether it is in opposition to God’s word.
  + That which does not line up with and agree with God’s word is to be rejected.
  + In so doing . . . in examining every teaching in light of God’s word . . . we are able to ***examine everything carefully*** and to ***test the spirits to see whether they are from God***, as the apostles Paul and John command us to.
* God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us and He has equipped each of us to discern truth from error, and we are commanded to exercise this discernment so that we protect ourselves from error and the attempts of our adversary, the devil, to deceive us.
* This morning we come to the final two commands of Paul to the church in this passage.
  + Having first commanded the Thessalonian church to ***stop extinguishing the Spirit***, to ***stop* diminishing the gift of *prophetic utterances***, ***but to examine everything carefully***, Paul now gives **2 final commands to the church, in general . . . *hold fast to that which is good* and *abstain from every form of evil*.**
* Coming on the heels of his command to ***examine everything carefully***, it would be natural to associate the following command to ***hold fast to that which is good*** as a natural result of obeying the command to ***examine everything carefully***.
  + After all, if you examine a teaching carefully . . . as we are instructed to do . . . the proper result would be that we would **reject that which is false and *hold fast to that which is good* and true.**
  + So, this command in the second part of v. 21 is a correct application of the first command in v. 21 to ***examine everything carefully***.
* But the command to ***hold fast to that which is good*** has a much broader application than merely **examining all forms of teaching to see whether they are from God**.
  + **This command has an application to every aspect of our lives.**
* Here in the final commands in v. 21-22 Paul is commanding the general conduct of our Christian lives. Here in v. 21-22 Paul is commanding that we ***hold fast to everything that is good and that we reject and avoid every form of evil.***
  + In so commanding, Paul is **not** instructing us merely to **cling to true teaching and to reject false teaching**, he is commanding us to **conduct our lives** in accordance with what we have learned to be **true** of the Christian life and to **avoid** **everything** that we have learned is **evil**.
* Here in v. 21-22 Paul is building on his specific instruction in v. 19-21, regarding the need to carefully examine the teaching that was entering into the church with a **general instruction to the church regarding their entire behavior toward good and evil.**

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***1 Thessalonians 5:21b— hold fast to that which is good***

* In these two general instructions to the church, Paul gives the two commands in the form of **positive actions** that we should take.
* The first command, stated in the second part of v. 21, is that **we, the church, should *hold fast to that which is good***.
* In this statement the command verb is translated ***hold fast*** (*katechō*—#2722), **meaning “to keep secure,” “to keep firm possession of,” or “cling to tenaciously.”**
  + This command is in the present tense and active voice.
    - The use of the present tense indicates a command to **continue action that is presently occurring.**
    - In other words, Paul’s command here is that **you are in possession of something valuable and must do everything in your power to retain it and keep possession of it.**
  + The use of the active voice indicates that **this action to retain something already in one’s possession is a work that each of us must do for ourselves.** 
    - **The Holy Spirit gives us that ability to *hold fast to that which is good*, but we are, individually, responsible for actually doing.**
    - In other words, the Holy Spirit gives us the ability, but He doesn’t do it for us. We are tasked with actually doing the work.
* And what are we commanded to **“tenaciously cling to”?** As we read in v. 21, **we are commanded to *hold fast to that which is good***.

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* + The English versions translate the Greek word *kalos* (#2570) with the somewhat generic word, ***good***. But the Greek word is more of a superlative, **“that which is beautiful, excellent, highly commendable, genuine and approved.”**
  + Building on the image I used a few weeks ago of the testing of precious metals, when a gold or silversmith has completed his or her testing of a precious metal and determined its purity, that precious gold or silver is said to be “genuine and approved,” or **“*kalos*,” as Paul uses the word here.**
* So, here in v. 21 the apostle Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to **“cling tenaciously to that which you possess and know to be good, genuine and commendable**.
  + **You already possess that which is good and genuine and commendable in the sight of God. Cling to it and don’t relinquish it!**

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***1 Thessalonians 5:22— abstain from every form of evil.***

* Then, in contrast to Paul’s command in v. 21, in v. 22 Paul gives a second, positive general command that we ***abstain from every form of evil***.
* When I say that this is a positive command, I mean that it is positive in regard to Paul’s command for each of us to take positive action to ***abstain from every form of evil***.
* In this command, the verb ***abstain*** (*apechomai*—#567) means “to actively repel or push something away from yourself.”
  + Here in v. 22, the command to ***abstain from every form of evil*** means **the opposite of tenaciously clinging to something.** It means “to tenaciously and vigorously avoid and shed oneself of every form of evil.”
* The term ***evil*** Paul uses here in v. 22 . . . *ponēros* (#4190) . . . means “evil, destructive, injurious, and wicked.”
  + The connotation of the Greek word *ponēros* is of something that is **a malignant evil and destroying everything it touches**.
* That final description I just gave . . . **a malignant evil that destroys everything it touches** . . . sounds very similar to something else we all know to be **a malignant evil that destroys everything it touches**.
  + It sounds like the description of **cancer!**
  + What is cancer? Cancer is a destructive disease that, if left unchecked, spreads throughout the human body, infecting and destroying all that is good in its path.
  + Cancer turns healthy tissue into infected, unhealthy and dying tissue.
  + And that is exactly what evil does. It infects and kills what is healthy and strong. And left unchecked, evil spreads throughout its human host, slowly transforming and killing the spirit within us.
* It’s interesting to note that the word **“cancer”** is derived from the Latin word *karkinos*, meaning “crab,” from which we get the English word, **“carcinoma.”**
  + The Latin term, *karkinos*, was first used by Hippocrates in 400 B.C. because he saw how cancerous tumors dug into healthy tissue in the way a crab burrows into the sand, making it hard to extricate.
* In many ways, the pervasive nature of cancer is very much like evil. Once it has taken hold, evil . . . like cancer . . . is very hard to extricate and is prone to return if not diligently treated.
* Note, also, in Paul’s command in v. 22 that he does not specify what sort of evil we are to avoid. He commands that we are to ***avoid every form of evil****.*
* And, like his previous command, here in v. 22 Paul commands action that we are to take on our own behalf.
  + Just as the Holy Spirit has given us the ability to actively ***cling to that which is good***, the Holy Spirit has also given each of the ability to actively ***avoid every form of evil***.
* As we see in these two final general commands of Paul, it is our Christian duty to actively ***cling to that which is good***, while at the same time, **actively shunning and removing every encumbrance of every form of sin.**
  + As D. Edmond Hiebert puts it, *“Christian growth requires not only the assimilation of the good, but also the rejection of the evil. The intensity of our adherence to the good will be measured by the strength of our rejection of evil.”*

**What is good and what is evil?**

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* But, now that Paul has given the church this general instruction to ***cling to what is good*** and ***avoid every form of evil***, a couple of practical questions arise.
  + What is ***good*** and what is ***evil***?
  + And, how do I, practically, obey these commands?
* First of all, **what is *good* and what is *evil*?**
  + At first glance, this may seem to be an easy question. Many people are quick to think, “That’s easy. We all know what’s good and what’s evil.”
  + But I’m here to tell you that identifying ***good*** and ***evil*** is not an easy question. And the reason it’s not an easy question to answer is **because in between the obviously good and the obviously evil there is a lot of ambiguous gray.**
  + And the problem with dealing with gray areas is the fact that **everybody has their own opinion.**
* Let me give you a couple of gray areas that Christians . . . good Christians . . . strongly disagree on.

**1.**  Many churches believe that the use of musical instruments during the worship service is not permitted. According to their strict interpretation, **whatever is not specifically permitted by Scripture is prohibited**, and Scripture does not specify the use of musical instruments in worship. Therefore, musical instruments are not permitted.

* + On the other hand, we believe that **unless explicitly prohibited by Scripture, the incorporation of such things as musical instruments in worship is permitted.**
  + But, as a result of differences of interpretation, there is much disagreement among brethren regarding whether it is sinful to use musical instruments during worship.
  + **What about you? What do you think?**

**2.** What about television, video games and movies?

* + Many Christians feel that because the content of so much that is contained in secular television and movies and in most video games is morally corrupt, the watching of these shows or playing of most games is harmful and sinful.
  + On the other hand, many people believe that with discernment and caution, a person can participate in these activities.
  + **What about you? What do you think?**

**3.** What about alcohol?

* + A great many Christians have very negative feelings toward the consumption of alcoholic beverages . . . either because they lived in the home of an alcoholic parent, or they, themselves, were previously addicted to and have been freed from the destructive influence and effects of alcohol.
  + As a result, many previously-addicted Christians strongly believe that the consumption of alcohol is sinful.
  + On the other hand, Scripture does not prohibit the consumption of alcohol, but gives instruction in Ephesians 5:18 ***not to be drunk with wine****.*
  + **What about you? What do you think?**

**4.** Here’s one that’s close to home, for me. What about working on Sunday?

* + Over the years, as an airline pilot, I have often had to work on Sundays, Christmas and Easter. Early in my career I was gone quite often on Sundays. I didn’t have a choice. Airlines fly on Sundays and I was a junior pilot. If I wanted to keep my job, I was expected to work on Sundays and holidays. It was only after I had been with the company for 10 years that I was able to get Sundays off. **Was it wrong for me to work on Sundays and miss church?**
  + And to show you how strictly some people interpret the 4th commandment, to ***remember the sabbath, day, to keep it holy***, a friend of Cindy works for a company that is owned by a Seventh Day Adventist family that requires their employees who are traveling on company business **not to travel on Saturday**, so as to keep the sabbath day holy. Even though she, herself, is not Seventh Day Adventist, she is still bound by company policy to not do any company business or even travel on company business on the sabbath.
  + **What do you think? Do you believe it’s a sin to work on Sunday?**

**Who is right?**

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* I’ve just given you four examples of what some Christians believe to be evil and sinful, while other Christians see nothing sinful or evil. **My question for you is, “who is right?”**
  + Is there even a “right” answer?
* My answer to you is . . . **there is a right answer**. But the “right” answer is **what you, in your heart and your own conscience, determine to be right or wrong.**
* **At the core of this issue is Christian liberty** . . . one’s interpretation of the direction that is given in God’s word.
  + Some Christians see God’s word as a guide to specify what is approved. Anything that is not explicitly approved is, therefore, not approved.
  + Other Christians see God’s word in the opposite light . . . that anything that is not specifically prohibited or disapproved is permissible.
* The example of music in the worship service is a good example.
  + Because Scripture does not explicitly specify that musical instruments are to be used in the worship of God, some Christians believe, therefore, interpret this to mean that musical instruments are not permitted.
  + While we, on the other hand, interpret the silence of Scripture on this subject to mean that musical instruments are permitted.
* This issue of Christian liberty and conscience was a big problem in the first generation church.
  + One of the first instances where it appeared as a problem was when the apostle Peter visited the church in Antioch.
  + In Acts 10:9-16 God had revealed to Peter, in a vision, that all kinds of meat are permissible to eat . . . even those that had previously been prohibited by God in the Mosaic Law. What was once considered unclean was, in Acts 10, declared clean and permissible to eat.
  + And having been given this new revelation, when Peter came to Antioch he **did** eat the same food as the Gentiles. But when some Jews from Jerusalem came to Antioch, Peter hypocritically withdrew from the Gentiles and no longer at the food that the he had been eating with them.
  + Because of his hypocrisy and the negative effect it had on the church, it was necessary for Paul to confront Peter and publicly rebuke him for his sinful hypocrisy.

**Peter’s Sin**

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***Galatians 2:11-14— 11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?***

* The problem of conscience, in regard to food that was permissible to eat, was also a problem in many of the early church congregations.
  + Because virtually every Christian had previously been a worshipper of the pagan Greek and Roman gods and had participated in their temple feasts, many of the new Christians strongly believed that it was sinful to eat meat that had been sacrificed to the pagan gods . . . that it was an offense to the true God.
  + At the same time, those who abstained from eating meat sacrificed to idols viewed those who ate such meat as being in sin.

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**The problem of eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods**

* Because of this persistent and pervasive problem, it was necessary for Paul to write and to explain the solution to this problem. In his letters to the Romans and Corinthians Paul directly addresses this issue of eating meat that has been sacrificed to pagan idols. In Romans 14 we read . . .

***Romans 14:13-16— 13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. 14  I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;***

* Paul’s instruction in Romans 14 . . . along with the same instruction in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 10 . . . teaches us that **what is sinful to our own conscience is sin. But . . . our conscience is not binding one someone else.**
  + In other words, we have no right to impose our own personal values upon others.
  + In the example of the meat sacrificed to idols, those who abstained from eating the meat that had been sacrificed to idols looked down upon those who did eat the meat.
  + But, in fact, as Paul states in Romans 14:14 . . .***I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.*** 
    - In other words, what is unclean and sinful to you **is** unclean and sinful. But what is unclean and sinful to you **is not necessarily** unclean and sinful to **me**.
* Now, that being said, Paul also has clear instruction regarding how to resolve what might become a divisive issue and a cause of stumbling.

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* + As Paul says in Romans 14:13, 1 Corinthians 8:12 and 10:28 . . .

***1 Corinthians 10:28-29— 28 But if anyone says to you, “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; 29 I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?***

* + Here, in v. 28-29 Paul instructs us to **be deferential to the brother or sister whose conscience is hurt by anything you might do, whether your conscience is injured or not.**
  + We are to be sensitive and deferential to our brothers and sisters in such matters.
* For example, in the matter of drinking alcohol, if I believe that drinking alcohol is permissible, but also know that it is a cause of stumbling for a brother or sister, I should defer to them and not consume alcohol in their presence, so as not to be a cause of stumbling for them.
* My purpose in the practical application section of this message has been to make the point that while we are commanded . . . as the body of Christ . . . to ***hold fast to that which is good;*** and ***abstain from every form of evil***, we are all, **individually**, responsible for obeying these commands.
  + Each of us is required to know what God’s word teaches and implement it in our lives.
* At the same time, we are all called to hold one another accountable, to point out where sin may exist, and to call one another to repentance where sin is found.
  + But we must be careful, as I have pointed out, to hold one another accountable to what Scripture clearly teaches and **not** to our personal preferences or personal conduct code.
* That is one . . . of many . . . problems with the current emphasis on **the social justice gospel**.
  + In addition to it being **no gospel at all**, **the proponents of the social justice gospel are attempting to codify Christian behavior**, for the purpose of making it conform to those who are trying to manipulate Christian behavior for their own nefarious purposes.
  + In other words, the **social justice gospel adherents are trying to make themselves the judges of what is good and what is evil . . . to force you to conform to their standards.**
* We must remember that each of our individual consciences is being guided by the Holy Spirit.
  + What may be permissible for one person’s conscience to do may not be permissible according to another person’s conscience.
  + The example of the consumption of alcohol is one of the best examples I can think of. For some it is no problem and no cause for stumbling. But for others it represents one of the greatest and terrible trials of their lives, for which they dare not be tempted again.