



# AVOIDING THE APPEARANCE OF IMPROPRIETY

“I value my reputation. I work hard to avoid even the appearance of impropriety.”

**(Richard Hanna, 1951-2020)**

# What Do We Mean?

"The appearance of impropriety is a phrase referring to a situation which to a layperson without knowledge of the specific circumstances might seem to raise ethics questions.

For instance, although a person might regularly and reliably collect money for her employer in her personal wallet and later give it to her employer, her putting it in her personal wallet may appear improper and give rise to suspicion, etc. It is common practice in the business and legal communities to avoid even the appearance of impropriety" (**Wikipedia**).

# What Do We Mean?

- When it comes to avoiding appearances of impropriety, many Bible believers have an attitude of "I don't care what other people think."
- Yet, this attitude is not supported by the scriptures.
- In fact, the need to avoid the appearance of impropriety is taught clearly by the Bible in two forms of binding authority:
  - i. **Direct Command** (1 Thess. 5:22).
  - ii. **Approved Example** (2 Cor. 8:16-24).

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- **1 Thess. 5:22 (KJV)** reads, "*Abstain from all appearance of evil.*"
- More modern translations alter the phrase "*all appearance*" and, instead, state something to the effect of "*abstain from every form of evil*" (NRSV, NKJV, and ESV).
- If you do a Google search on "*abstain from all appearance of evil,*" you will find countless arguing against the plain meaning of this command.
- Consider a few examples ...

# David Padfield (Church of Christ)

If I were to make a list of the most abused (or "twisted") passages in the Bible, I think that 1 Thes. 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 . . . Maybe by now you can see the problem. **It is hard to imagine anything that doesn't "appear" evil to someone! . . . In 1 Thess. 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).**

# Dick Blackford (Church of Christ)

I have often heard this verse misquoted to the effect that we should “Abstain from the very appearance of evil.” **The word “very” is added to make it sound like it is wrong because it “looks like” evil to someone.** “Very” is not in the text nor in any of over 30 translations I have checked. It is an addition which contributes to misunderstanding the verse. The misinterpretation of I Thes. 5:22 has caused no small amount of problems for brethren and congregations. **This misinterpretation encourages mote hunting.** Accusations are often made on suspicion and one may become guilty of speaking evil against a brother (Js. 4:11) when, in fact, he may have done no evil. Dissension and division are often the result.

# Randy Cantrell (Church of Christ)

I Thess. 5:22 is among the most twisted passages in the New Testament. **Some people claim this verse means that if something “appears” to be evil we must abstain from it. Naturally, the person explaining the scripture gets to determine if a thing appears evil or not. Most anything can appear evil to someone! . . . In I Thess. 5:22 Paul is talking 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. That’s an arbitrary standard.** Since this is the case, why do so many Christians twist this passage into meaning something Paul never intended? I think it’s due to laziness or Bible ignorance. Some Christians don’t know why they believe what they believe and still others are too lazy to go into detail to explain what they believe.

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- Did you notice the common theme bolded in each person's denial of the simple truth taught by 1 Thess. 5:22?
- Each writer has made the assertion that the verse cannot possibly be talking about avoiding the appearance of evil because **"it is hard to imagine anything that doesn't appear evil to someone!"**
  - They are exactly right in this assessment. Therein lies the flaw in their argument.
- **Our goal is not to avoid appearing engaged in something someone else has determined to be evil. Instead, our goal is to avoid any appearance of what God defines as evil.**



# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- The appearance of impropriety CAN be, as both Mr. Padfield and Mr. Cantrell stated, an "arbitrary standard," but only if we use the incorrect standard.
  - God's Word is supposed to be our standard in every matter, and if we use it correctly there is nothing arbitrary about its standard.
- Now, "mote hunting," as Mr. Blackford put it, does unfortunately happen when a MISAPPLICATION of 1 Thess. 5:22 (not misunderstanding, as Mr. Blackford said) occurs.
  - However, isn't "mote hunting" also one of the very reasons why we should take great care to avoid appearances of impropriety?
  - The world is "mote hunting" Christians everyday without just cause.

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- The world is "mote hunting" Christians everyday without just cause.
  - *“Having a good conscience, that **when they defame you as evildoers**, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed” (1 Pet. 3:16).*
  - *“Blessed are you when **they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake**. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12).*
- We should not make the "mote hunt" easy for these people looking to play "gotcha" with our integrity and our Lord's holy and blameless name because appearances matter.

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- The word translated "appearance" in 1 Thess. 5:22 is from the Greek word **eidos**, which means, "Properly, that which strikes the eye, which is exposed to view" (Thayer).
- This word appears five times in the New Testament.
  - i. Twice it refers to shape (**Luke 3:22, 9:29**).
  - ii. Once it refers to fashion / form (**John 5:37**).
  - iii. Once it refers to sight (**2 Cor. 5:7**).
  - iv. And once it refers to appearance (**1 Thess. 5:22**).

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- Consistent across every scriptural instance of this Greek word is the idea of something being visible for others to see.
  - **Luke 3:22** – *And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily **form** [eidos] like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, “You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased.”*
  - **Luke 9:29** – *As He prayed, the **appearance** [eidos] of His face was altered, and His robe became white and glistening.*
  - **John 5:37** – *And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His **form** [eidos].*
  - **2 Cor. 5:7** – *For we walk by faith, not by **sight** [eidos].*
  - **1 Thess. 5:22** – *Abstain from all **appearance** [eidos] of evil.*

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- Based on the consistent meaning of the word “eidos” throughout scripture, 1 Thess. 5:22 would be teaching that we are to **avoid anything that appears or gives a visual display of something God defines as evil.**
- Of course, no matter how hard we try, we are not always going to be successful in this endeavor even if we are living righteously.
  - *“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake” (Matt. 5:11).*
  - *“Having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12).*

# Direct Command – 1 Thess. 5:22

- We may not be doing something evil, but that does not mean people will stop saying evil things about our character.
- We are not excused from doing our part in discouraging people from developing negative perceptions about us though, and one way we do so is by avoiding anything that can make it seem (visibly appear) like we are engaged in something sinful or participating in something that can damage our influence.

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

**“It is the business of the Christian community to do its business in such a way that men of the world will have no cause to suspect anything contrary to righteousness in its affairs.”**

G. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945)

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- Before sending 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, Paul waited in Macedonia for Titus to arrive with news from Corinth about their response to his first epistle.
  - *“When I came to Troas to preach Christ’s gospel, and a door was opened to me by the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I did not find Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I departed for Macedonia” (2 Cor. 2:12-13).*
- When Titus finally arrived, Paul rejoiced that Titus brought good news about the church’s response to his letter.
  - *“Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more” (2 Cor. 7:6-7).*



# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- However, it appears that Titus also reported (or through inspiration Paul knew) that something was off about Corinth's support for the collection mentioned in **1 Cor. 16:1-4**.
  - *“Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come” (v.1-2).*
- The Corinthians started the collection but became slack or possibly outright stopped taking up the collection for the needy saints, leading Paul to encourage them to finish the good work they began but had neglected to complete (**2 Cor. 8:8-12**).

## Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

<sup>8</sup> I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. <sup>9</sup> For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. <sup>10</sup> And in this I give advice: **It is to your advantage not only to be doing what you began and were desiring to do a year ago; <sup>11</sup> but now you also must complete the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to desire it, so there also may be a completion out of what you have.** <sup>12</sup> For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have (2 Cor. 8:8-12).

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- Paul would then explain that he, Titus, a third unnamed but praiseworthy brother, as well as other people "*chosen by the churches*" would be coming to receive and transport the Corinthians' precious gift to the needy brethren (**2 Cor. 8:16-19**).
  - <sup>16</sup> *But thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the heart of **Titus**.* <sup>17</sup> *For he not only accepted the exhortation, but being more diligent, he **went to you of his own accord.*** <sup>18</sup> ***And we have sent with him the brother whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches,*** <sup>19</sup> ***and not only that, but who was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift,*** which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind.

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- Why such a large entourage of people to transport the contribution?
  - **To avoid the appearance of impropriety.**
- This large group of people mentioned in **2 Cor. 8:16-19** would transport the contribution in order to:
  - ***“Avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us—providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Cor. 8:20-21).***
- As if this wasn't enough, Paul also felt the need in **v.22-24** to defend the character of each person transporting the gift just to relieve the Corinthians of thinking any impropriety might take place.

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- Even though they were completely innocent of all wrongdoing, these brethren went to great lengths to avoid the appearance of impropriety.
- If men above reproach such as Paul, Titus, and the third unnamed brother praised by the Holy Spirit saw the need to avoid the appearance of impropriety and avoid possible "*blame*" by not traveling alone with the Corinthians' gift, we should see just how important it is for us to avoid the appearance of evil today, even when we are completely innocent.

# Approved Example - 2 Cor. 8:16-24

- “Paul’s carefulness led him to plan ahead with due consideration for things honest before men and God. **Of course, he and the others must first actually be praiseworthy before God; but he felt they must also appear that way in the presence of men . . .** He determined that everything would be both honest and open. He left no room for suspicion or criticism” (**Thoralf Gilbrant**).
- Unfortunately, it seems most people today are content with only being praiseworthy before God.
- However, we must always seek to - as Paul and the other disciples did - provide honorable things **both** *"in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men"* (v.21).

# Conclusion

- The New Testament clearly teaches the need to avoid any appearance of impropriety, as defined by God and His Word.
- We don't do this to be men-pleasers (see **Gal. 1:10**). Rather, we do so to prevent - as much as possible - Christ's name from being blasphemed by any perceived misconduct on our part and to provide honorable things in the sight of God and all men.
- We should never provide people with an opportunity to question our conduct or speak evil against the name of Christ.
- **2 Cor. 8:16-24** clearly illustrates this truth, regardless if the KJV's translation of **1 Thess. 5:22** is a mistranslation or if I have misrepresented its true meaning.

# Conclusion

- Let's all strive to have a good testimony among all men, even among those who are outside the body of Christ.
  - Elders must meet this qualification (**1 Tim. 3:7**), but every individual Christian should strive for it as well.
- *“Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27).*
  - People will hear of our affairs one way or another.
  - Let's do our part in keeping our conduct worthy of the gospel of Christ in hopes of preventing that gospel and our Lord from ever being blasphemed.