

## **Abstaining From Evil**

**by John O. Reid (1930-2016)**

***Forerunner, "Ready Answer," May 1999***

Our Savior Jesus Christ tells us in Matthew 5:13-14 that we are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world"—we who are also the weak and the foolish of this world (I Corinthians 1:27). Mentally, when we hear such praises from God, some of us look both ways and behind, and say, "He must be talking about someone else." We struggle to overcome, and we feel we are always "a day late and a dollar short." Though we wish with all our heart that we were more like God, His image in us seems all the more elusive.

But Jesus did not lie in saying these things. As salt gives food a rich, pleasant taste, we are those who are to give a good flavor to the lives of those we encounter. There should be something in our conduct that shows the fruit of the life to which God has called us.

He goes on to say that, if we are not "radiating with flavor"—reflecting the teachings of God in our lives—what use are we, especially to God Himself? Salt without flavor has no use, and it can even be detrimental to the things it comes in contact with. Maybe its best use is to be put on icy roads, to be ground under the tires of vehicles and then washed away.

In Christ's other metaphor, light illuminates what was once dark; it reveals things that were hidden. Though we may be poor, considered old and over the hill, uneducated and obscure, when we live our lives as He instructs, we are a brilliant beacon to this tired and confused world. Our lives can shine a spotlight on the solutions to many common problems experienced by our friends and neighbors.

Jesus points out that we should not hide our light under a basket (verse 15), but live it in the open for all to see. We can set a proper example of the abundant way to live. We should give everyone we meet the light of our loving concern, the light of our honesty, the light of joy and peace, the light of godly family relations, the light of good work habits, and all the other rays of light contained in God's way.

In doing this, we will initially bring attention upon ourselves, and this may at times become uncomfortable. Righteousness has an uncanny tendency to bring out the worst in carnal human beings. Ultimately, however, we will glorify God the Father and His Son by it, promoting the cause of the Kingdom of God.

### **An Area of Concern**

To set the right example—to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world—we must take care of one particular area. Paul mentions it in I Thessalonians 5:22: "Abstain from every form of evil." The KJV renders it, "Abstain from all appearance of evil."

"Abstain" (Gk. *apéchesthe*) literally means "to hold oneself off" or "to keep oneself from." A common synonym for this word is "refrain." When we abstain or refrain from doing something, we exercise restraint and self-control. We look at the situation with a sound mind, soberly, to ensure that we "do the right thing."

"Evil" is a translation of the Greek word *poneros*, used some 75 times in the New Testament, mostly as "evil" or "wickedness." This kind of evil is both the act itself as well as the corrupting effect it has on others. It is a broad term that includes many forms of malevolence, malignancy, corruption and sin.

Notice the views on I Thessalonians 5:22 taken by three well-known commentaries:

» *Adam Clarke*: Sin not, and avoid even the appearance of it. Do not drive your morality so near the bounds of evil as to lead even weak persons to believe that ye actually touch, taste, or handle it. Let not the form of it, *eidōs*, appear with or among you, much less the substance. Ye are called to holiness; be ye holy, for God is holy.

» *Expositor's Bible Commentary*: Paul very clearly intends an antithesis with v. 21 here. "Hold fast" to the good, but "hold yourselves free from" every kind of evil that tries to parade itself as a genuine representation of the Spirit. Only then can maximum benefit for the body of Christ in local worship be achieved.

» *Barnes' Notes*: [Abstain] not only from evil itself, but from that which seems to be wrong. There are many things which are known to be wrong. They are positively forbidden by the laws of heaven. . . . But there are also many things about which there may be some reasonable doubt. . . . There are many things which, in themselves, may not appear to us to be positively wrong, but which are so considered by large and respectable portions of the community; and for us to do them would be regarded as inconsistent and improper.

There are things, also, where, whatever may be our motive, we may be certain that our conduct will be regarded as improper. A great variety of subjects, such as those pertaining to dress, amusements, . . . and various practices in the transaction of business, come under this general class; which, though on the supposition that they cannot be proved to be in themselves positively wrong or forbidden, have much the "appearance" of evil, and will be so interpreted by others. The safe and proper rule is to lean always to the side of virtue. In these instances it may be certain that there will be no sin committed by abstaining; there may be by indulgence.

Because we represent God, any appearance of evil presents a wrong picture of who God is and what He is doing. How we conduct ourselves before the world—and among our brethren in the church—is vitally important.

## **A Double Standard**

Even carnal men know the basics of right and wrong (Romans 2:14-15). However, they feel no need to adhere to such a code of clean and honest living, and the Bible declares that their carnal minds cannot subject themselves to it (Romans 8:7). Even for us, some of whom have been converted for many years, living righteous lives is still a struggle.

The world we live in feels no sense of struggle because it promotes a double standard: How people in this world think, speak, and act—what they allow in their lives—does not compare with how they expect Christians to conduct their lives. Christians are expected to be perfect, law-abiding, conscientious, compassionate and docile, while non-Christians can do as they please.

Many in this world accept a little bit of cheating on business deals and income taxes. They believe homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex, and provocative dressing and language to be matters of personal choice. Some feel abuse of drugs and alcohol is "no big deal." They live with these standards—really, the lack thereof—and they have accepted them as the norm. Yet once they know someone is a Christian, they expect him to operate under a whole different set of ethics.

How do people who know us view our lifestyle? Do they see a neat home with a tidy yard? Are our children polite and well behaved? Are we good neighbors, willing to help and shunning the local gossip? Is our car clean and in good repair? Do our bosses consider us among their best and most valuable employees? Are we known and praised for our honest and trustworthy business dealings?

What kind of light are we shedding on this world? Everyone we come across automatically records impressions of us; everything we say and do reflects what we are, what we believe and whom we represent. For our sake and for theirs, we should be reflecting God and His character and not our carnality.

### **Among the Brethren**

God has not called those we associate with in the world. In the church, though, we deal with those whose calling and opportunity for salvation is now! This raises the stakes considerably, and the effects of making an evil impression have far greater consequences, even eternal ones.

Notice this outstanding example in Paul's ministry:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged, as though I were present, concerning him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (I Corinthians 5:1-6)

The Corinthian church's coddling of this perversion gave the people of Corinth the appearance that God's people would allow this sin—a sin even unbelievers would never tolerate! Inside the church it gave the appearance that one could continue in sin and still remain part of the body. The apostle warns them that, just as a pinch of leaven will puff up a whole loaf of bread—or as one rotten apple will corrupt a whole barrel of them—so this sin, if allowed to continue, would ruin the entire church.

We see, then, that as God's children, we have to be aware of everything we do. We must be mindful of how our actions affect others around us. Offending or causing a weaker member to sin, even by doing something that is allowable, is still a terrible sin (Matthew 18:6; Luke 17:2). Paul writes in Ephesians 5:15, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise."

The key to his advice is in the word "see." It connotes not merely the act of looking but the actual perception of the object or situation we are viewing. It implies mental contemplation—really thinking about our actions!

Thus, after we evaluate the situation we find ourselves in, we must then conduct ourselves with great care, prudently, wisely, so that we both do the right thing and set the right example. Today, we are cautioned to "stop, look and listen" at railroad crossings before we proceed across the tracks; we should practice the same care spiritually on the road of life.

### **Paul's Example**

The apostle Paul was fully aware that others studied and imitated his example, so he was very careful about how he appeared to the members of the church. I Corinthians 8:9-13 contains a fine example of his circumspect living.

The overall subject of this passage is meat offered to idols. After sacrificing an animal in the temples, the pagan priests often sold the surplus meat to local merchants, who included it along with other meat at his stall in the marketplace. Some felt that meat was meat, and since there is only one true God, the meat offered to a man-made image was perfectly fine to eat. Others who were new in the faith or more sensitive to issues of spiritual contamination, believed that to eat such meat placed them in fellowship with—and they were thus defiled by—the false god, a demon, to which it had been offered.

Verse 10 shows that some Christians would even eat meat *in* the pagan temple! The new or sensitive Christian, seeing this—and perhaps having recently rejected that false religion—would suffer a weakening of his conscience or his faith. In an extreme case, he might even return to his paganism and be lost (verse 11)!

Paul, however, provides the correct example:

When you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (verses 12-13)

Notice the apostle's starting point: Such a sin against a brother in Christ is a sin against Christ Himself! It is that serious! However "legal" eating the meat might be under God's law, the more important point is that the effect of one's actions on a brother's character takes precedence. Paul's conclusion, then, is that he would never even give the appearance of sin if it would harm a brother in the faith.

Is this not the love of God in action? God's love manifests itself in thoughts, words and deeds of care and concern for our brethren (I John 4:7-11, 21-5:1). It should be our motivation in walking circumspectly, setting a right example and never giving even a hint of evil in our way of life. If we do these things, to our amazement we will prove to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world!