

1 Thessalonians 5: 22; "Abstain from every form of Evil", Sermon # 31 in the series - "A Persevering Faith", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on January 25th, 2009, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

We are living in a day as Christians in which the truth of this verse is being questioned heavily. There are some Christians who as you observe their lives; not trying to be critical; that you might think that they believe that allowing a little evil is good in their own lives, and not every form of evil is bad. We are suffering in our society from a general breakdown in morality and decency and sobriety and seriousness. A generation ago, many of our Christian forefathers read this verse and they would not go to movies; they would not play cards; they would not wear make-up, they would not wear clothes that even hinted at immodesty. They were made fun of by those who thought that they had the liberty to do all or some of those things. They were made fun of, as being too strict; too straight-laced. They were seen as having their list of dos and don'ts and they were dismissed as being legalistic because, it was said, that many of them thought that this was what it meant to be holy and sanctified. They may, indeed, have had some gross misconceptions about what true heart religion was if they simply thought that abstaining from things which might contain evil in them would keep them from the evil of their hearts, and I certainly think that when we make up a list of rules of what we are and are not going to do that it is possible that we will needlessly restrict ourselves from participation in things that in some cases may be lawful. But I would say, that without contradiction, that our generation of Christians is in great danger of not obeying the commandment that we have before us. In other words, our generation has something to learn from this commandment, that if we do not obey it, we may end up violating the 4 commands that come before it that we have already looked at. "Do not quench the Spirit." "Do not despise prophecies." "Test all things; and hold fast what is good."

What we have before us is a command not to participate in any form of evil. The old King James says, "Abstain from all appearance of evil." We really need to think about the Greek word for form and appearance here. It is "eidous". "From every perception of wicked thing, be abstaining", it is literally rendered. It signifies, "basically that which meets the eye", "the external appearance." "But from this it develops the secondary meaning of 'kind' or 'species'." (Leon Morris in his New Testament Commentary.) Lenski says it should read, "from every form of what is wicked, hold yourselves off." This afternoon I would like us to look into this statement from a Biblical perspective and hopefully we will come away with a better understanding of this statement so that our God will be glorified in us. I want us to look first at the word "abstain" in relation to every form of evil. And then secondly I want us to think about some of the forms or kinds of evil that the Bible says that we should abstain from. And then finally we will ask the question; how may a person

abstain from every form of evil?

1st - The word "abstain" in relation to every form of evil.

We have seen this word before in 1 Thessalonians 4, verse 3. (Apechesthe in the Greek) "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality." The implication is that it may be true that others are doing this, but you be keeping yourself from it. In terms of our sanctification; in terms of our becoming holy and becoming more like Christ, we must understand that God is looking at whether we can abstain from evil. Can we hold ourself off from it? Can we refrain from it? Turn with me to Psalm 18 verse 20 with me. Here we find David's continual watching of His heart to keep it from sin, to abstain from every form of evil. "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me." "For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God." "For all His judgments were before me, and I did not put away His statutes from me." "I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity." Now you will notice several things here with me. There is a reward for practicing righteousness, and a part of our practicing righteousness is to have clean hands. To have dirty hands would mean that the guilt of sin was upon them for the things that he did. Keeping the ways of the Lord meant in this case that David had not done wickedly; he had not wickedly departed from His God. In other words, to be able to abstain from evil we must learn to keep up our fellowship, communion, and prayer life before Him. We are always "setting the Lord before us", and since He is at our right hand, we shall not be moved." Not only moved in the sense that we will not be greatly affected by what men do to us, but also not moved in the sense of what temptation to sin will attempt to do get us to do. David put all the precepts and promises of God's word before him, and because he did not put them away from him it says in verse 23, "I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity."

So in order to abstain from every form of evil, David had to learn to keep his heart. Turn over with me to Proverbs chapter 4, verse 20. Here we find a more detailed account of what the Christian should do with the word of God in order to abstain from every form of evil. Solomon probably received this instruction from his father David and he wanted to pass it on to his son and to us. "My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my words; incline your ear to my sayings." "Do not let them depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart; for they are life to those who find them, and health to all their flesh." "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life." Now the way that Solomon recommended to his son to abstain from evil was to not let the word of God depart from his eyes. He read it often and frequently. And not only did he read it, but he also recommended that his son would keep the Scriptures "in the midst of his heart". This means that they are pondered and meditated upon day and night. When they are kept in the midst of the heart in this way then there will be the power at work in connection with the Holy Spirit's working, so that the believer can abstain from

every form of evil. "Thy word I have hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee. (Psalm 119, verse 11) So keeping the heart is the secret strength which we receive from God to abstain from every form of evil. The keeping of the heart only happens when God hears our prayers for help and gives us the grace to not respond to the drawing temptations of sin. Psalm 119, verse 145 says, "I cry out with my whole heart; hear me, O Lord!" "I will keep Your statutes." "I cry out to You; save me, and I will keep your testimonies." Let me ask this question; do you want to abstain from every form of evil? Then you must learn to pray and to keep God's word in the midst of your heart. Keep the fire of your devotion burning on the altar of your heart so that you might abstain from every form of evil.

Secondly - I would like us to think of some of the forms of evil that the Bible says that we should abstain from.

Turn with me over to Mark chapter 7 and we will find a list of some of the forms of evil. Here in this chapter the Pharisees, those religious leaders among the Jews who prided themselves on outward cleanliness, the ceremonial cleanliness which was commanded in the law, are complaining to Jesus about the fact that His disciples did not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but they ate with unwashed hands. In verse 6, Jesus says to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.' "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." Now this is one of the first and primary ways that you and I can serve and honor God. We honor Him by abstaining from false doctrine. We test everything by the word of God. We do not want to be hypocrites so we abstain from the commandments of men which tell us to do things and to believe things that will not honor God. "For laying aside the commandment of God," Jesus says, "you hold the tradition of men--the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do." "He said to them, 'All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.'" You see the Pharisees were able in many cases to abstain from outward forms of sin, and they would wash the pitchers and the cups and keep themselves outwardly unstained from the world, but still their hearts were defiled and many things coming from their hearts were defiling them. So in verse 14 Jesus called all the multitude to Himself, and He said to them, 'Hear Me, everyone, and understand; there is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him, but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.' "If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!" The disciples did not understand this principle of truth. They thought that abstaining from every form of evil was simply abstaining from the participation in its outward forms. They had not had heart religion explained to them. Verse 18 - "So He said to them, 'Are you thus without understanding also?' "Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" "And He said, 'What comes out of a man, that defiles a man.'" "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts,

adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness deceit, lewdness, and the evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness." "All these evil things (we could say - forms of evil) come from within and defile a man." In other words these are things that a Christian should be abstaining from. The temptation to sin may come from outside the person, or from his own mind and imagination dwelling on the possibilities of sin, but it is something that this text says, "enters the heart", and when it is then not abstained from in the heart, sin is conceived and sin will then lead that person to think, or say, or do evil in the form that the thoughts of the heart take. The real question is whether the person can obey the Lord and abstain from these forms of evil.

And this leads me finally to ask - How may a person abstain from every form of evil?

Let's take each one of these forms and assign a verse to it. Evil thoughts - I would think that this would include malice and envy and jealousy toward our fellow men. Evil thoughts within the heart are something which we should abstain from. Remember that it was because the thoughts of man's heart were only evil continually, it says in Genesis 6: 5, that God destroyed the world with a flood. God, who looks upon the heart of a person, is very displeased when a Christian has evil thoughts running through his mind. He should be attempting by the grace of God with everything that is within him, to put such thoughts away and out of his mind. Proverbs 12: 5 says, The thoughts of the righteous are right, but the counsels of the wicked are deceitful. Proverbs 15: 26 says, "The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord, but the words of the pure are pleasant." The Lord sees the thoughts of the wicked and they are an abomination to Him, but the Christian who is pure in heart, will not only have good and right thoughts, but those thoughts will translate into words which are pleasant to both God and man. How do you abstain from such thoughts? We are told in Romans 12: 2. "And do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Your mind must be renewed by the grace of Christ to think good thoughts. Philippians 4: 8 is the best verse that I can think of in this regard. "Finally brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--think (or meditate on these things) In other words, pray and ask the Lord to give you the strength to lift your thoughts up and make them right thoughts and then turn the attention of your mind in the direction of the pure and lovely things.

Adulteries and fornications - This of course would include all the lusting after a woman or women that goes on in a man's heart; or the lusting after a man or men that goes on in a woman's heart. A wide variety of sensual and unclean and inappropriate desires. We have already spoken about this when I preached to you on 1 Thessalonians chapter 4, verse 3. It is moral purity and a clean heart that God is

looking for. How to abstain from it? Make a covenant with your eyes like Job said that he did in Job 31: 1 - "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?" "For what is the allotment of God from above, and th inheritance of the Almighty from on high?" "Is it not destruction for the wicked and disaster for the workers of iniquity?" "Does he not see all my ways, and count all my steps?" And the Apostle Peter says in 1 Peter 2: 11 - "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having you conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by the good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation." You can see here that the way to abstain from fleshly lusts is to pray to God to replace them with thoughts of how you might do good and help people around you, even unbelievers. Think of Psalm 51: 10 -"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." "Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit." "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will be converted to You." This is how to abstain from fleshly lusts.

In fact, the verses that I have quoted to you concerning thoughts and concerning abstaining from fleshly lusts will serve to apply to all the other forms of sin which I have listed, which the Bible itself lists that we are to abstain from. But, in closing; when we abstain from these things, what is to prevent us from becoming self-righteous and despising other people around us? What will keep us from pride? Well the answer is found in the book of Jude verses 17 to the end of the book. "But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the Apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts." "These are sensual persons, (that is; they are soulish or worldly), persons who cause divisions, not having the Spirit." Without the Spirit you cannot abstain from fleshly lusts or have right motives if you do. "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." "And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh." That is how you keep from being self-righteous and despising others who are not abstaining from every form of evil. You build yourself up on your most holy faith, you pray in the Spirit, you keep yourself in the love of God, you keep looking for the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life." You "preserve yourself in the love of God", for that is how that one phrase can be translated. You remember the mercy and the love of God to you, and then you are not only able to abstain from every form of evil, but you are able to go further and actually love those and help those who are not making progress, or even deceived at various points. You are able to make wise and holy distinctions as to how you will go about helping them. So of them you will have compassion on them. You will treat

them very tenderly, knowing their weakness could easily be yours. Others you will go and confront them with their problems and you will attempt to reach out and save them with fear, pulling them out of the fire of their sins by reproof and rebuke. All the while that you are doing this, you hate the sins that have brought them to that point. You hate even the garments that they have defiled in their sensual filthiness. Your attitude toward their sin is hatred and loathing, but your attitude toward them as persons is, "I want to snatch them out of it"; "I want to hold them back from it". "I will pray that they will abstain from it themselves in time." This attitude of humility and godly fear coupled with the love of God that will keep you from becoming self-righteous as you abstain from every form of evil. Remember the power of Christ to help you through the Holy Spirit and extol it in the songs of your heart. "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever." "Amen".