

***The Greatest Problem Facing the Church***

***1 Thessalonians 5:21-22***

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For the past two Wednesday evenings we have looked at the subject of unity in the church. Such unity, as I said, can never come at the expense of the truth. Gordan Clark wrote, "Since God is truth, a contempt for the truth is equally a contempt for God." He's right! An attack on the truth is an attack on God! Clark's statement does not suggest that unity or love is unimportant. We must be loving and we must seek unity. We must reflect the long-suffering of God and the meekness of our Savior. But all of that must be built on a foundation of non-negotiable truth.

I have been following a story this week regarding the reaction by the Muslim community to a statement that the Pope made regard jihad (holy war). And as I have been reading various news articles, it struck me that opposing views are not tolerated by Muslims. They can disagree with your conviction but you cannot disagree with their's. This response reminded me of our culture. You can say just about anything as long as it is not spiritual, moral or ethical. Yet what we hear much of in the media is either against Republicans, President Bush, or Christians but not against Muslims. When I think about this problem, immediately I think about the church. Because *the greatest problem facing the church today is its lack of discernment*. It lacks the ability to discern between what is right and what is wrong.

John MacArthur, illustrates this in his book, *Reckless Faith*, when he says that one of the reasons for a "low level of discernment in the church today is the reluctance to take a definitive stand on any issue. Those with any convictions at all are supposed to hold those beliefs with as much slack as possible. Dogmatism is not permitted. To pronounce anything true and call its antithesis error is to challenge society's only remaining dogma. Refuse to equivocate on any point of principle or doctrine, and you will be labeled too narrow. Zeal for the truth has become politically incorrect.

In the secular world it is often thought uncouth to voice any opinion at all on spiritual, moral, or ethical matters. A plethora of Phil Donahue-style talk shows exist to remind us of this fact, and they do so by parading in front of us the most bizarre and extreme advocates of every radical "alternative lifestyle" imaginable. We are not supposed to condemn these people; the whole point is to broaden our minds and raise our level of tolerance. Anyone who responds negatively is viewed with the same contempt that used to be reserved for bigots and religious hypocrites.

The other day one of these programs broadcast a show featuring bearded lesbians. A petite woman was seated on the stage sporting a thick black beard and full moustache. All her other physical attributes, her voice, and her clothing were fully feminine. She declared that she was proud of the beard and really didn't care what anyone else thought of it. Besides, her lesbian lover found facial hair attractive. She said she was actually taking hormones to make her beard grow

even thicker.

A teenage girl in the audience timidly stated that she thought it was unfortunate that the bearded woman was purposely alienating herself from mainstream society. She suggested that the woman might really be happier if she stopped the hormone treatments and underwent electrolysis instead.

At that the studio audience turned disagreeable. Several people booed the teenage girl. Another woman from the audience, her voice choked with emotion, scolded the teenager: "How dare you criticize this beautiful creature! Who are you to tell her how she should look? Society shouldn't impose arbitrary standards on people. Everyone should be free to be whatever they want to be."

The audience responded with sustained applause. The bearded woman grinned triumphantly. And the teenage girl sat down in shame.

The culture around us has declared war on all standards, and the church is unwittingly following suit. It has become quite popular among Christians to assert that almost nothing is really black and white. Virtually all issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad are painted in shades of gray. Many Christians assume this is the proper way of understanding truth" (46-47).

The church cannot afford to lose its discernment but it has. And this has become the greatest problem facing the church. "It is obvious that not *every* issue is cast in black and white. There are many questions to which Scripture does not explicitly speak. For example, should Christians watch television? Nothing in Scripture forbids it. But clearly television poses certain dangers for the Christian. And there are principles in Scripture that can help us discern what kinds of things we should watch and how we should interact with what we see. But there is no express rule given to govern how much or how little television we should watch. It is a gray area. But many of the issues being compromised among Christians today are *not* questionable. They are *not* gray areas. There is no room for compromise here. Scripture speaks very clearly against homosexuality, for example. The Christian position on adultery is not at all vague. The question of whether a believer ought to marry an unbeliever is spelled out with perfect clarity. Scripture quite plainly forbids any Christian to take another Christian to court. Selfishness and pride are explicitly identified as sins. [Yet those areas are] treated as gray areas on Christian radio, on Christian television, and in Christian literature. People want all such matters to be negotiable. And too many Christian leaders willingly oblige. The line of distinction between truth and error, wisdom and foolishness, and church and world are being obliterated. The truth is that far more things are black-and-white issues than most people realize. Most of the truths of God's Word are explicitly contrasted with opposing ideas.

Jay Adams calls this the principle of antithesis, and he points out that it is fundamental to genuine discernment. He writes, "In the Bible, where antithesis is so important, discernment-the ability to distinguish God's thoughts and God's ways from all others-is essential. Indeed, God says that "the wise in heart will be called discerning" (Proverbs 16:21). From the Garden of Eden with its two trees (one allowed, one forbidden) to the eternal destiny of the human being in

heaven or in hell, the Bible sets forth two, and only two, ways: God's way, and all others. Accordingly, people are said to be saved or lost. They belong to God's people or the world. There was Gerizim, the mount of blessing, and Ebal, the mount of cursing. There is the narrow way and the wide way, leading either to eternal life or to destruction. There are those who are against and those who are with us, those within and those without. There is life and death, truth and falsehood, good and bad, light and darkness, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, love and hatred, spiritual wisdom and the wisdom of the world. Christ is said to be the way, the truth, and the life, and no one may come to the Father but by Him. His is the only name under the sky by which one may be saved.”

All truth sets itself against error. Where Scripture speaks, it speaks with authority. It speaks definitively. It speaks decisively. It calls for absolute conviction. It demands that we submit to God and resist the devil (Jas.4:7). It urges us to discern between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1 John 4:6). It commands us to turn away from evil and do good (1 Peter 3:11). It calls us to reject the broad way that seems right to the human mind (Prov. 14:12; 16:25) and follow the narrow way prescribed by God (Matt. 7:13-14). It tells us that our ways are not God's ways, nor are our thoughts His thoughts (Isa. 55:8). It orders us to protect the truth and reject lies (Rom. 1:25). It declares that no lie is of the truth (1 John 2:21). It guarantees that the righteous shall be blessed and the wicked perish (Ps. 1:1, 6). And it reminds us that "friendship with the world is hostility toward God" (James 4:4). Discernment demands that where Scripture speaks with clarity, a hard line must be drawn.

Christ is against human philosophy, against empty deception, against human tradition, and against the elementary principles of this world (Col. 2:8). Those things cannot be integrated with true Christian belief; they must be repudiated and steadfastly resisted. Scripture demands that we make a definitive choice: "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). "Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15)” (John MacArthur, *Reckless Faith*, 49-51).

As we look at this problem facing the church, I want to invite you to turn to 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22. It is here in this passage where Paul calls the Thessalonians to *test all things*. Notice what he says, “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

### **Test All Things (v.21a)**

J.C. Ryal says, “Every individual Christian has a right to judge for himself by the Word of God, whether that which is put before him as religious truth, is God’s truth, or is not. He does not say, ‘Whatsoever apostles – whatsoever evangelists, pastors and teachers – whatsoever you bishops – whatsoever you ministers tell you is truth: that you are to believe.’ No: he says, ‘Prove all things.’ He does not say, ‘Whatsoever the universal church pronounces true, that you are to hold.’ No: he says, ‘Prove all things.’ The principle laid down is this, ‘Prove all things by the Word of God. All ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all

practices – prove all by the Word of God. Measure all by the measure of the Bible. Compare all with the standard of the Bible. Weigh all in the balances of the Bible. Examine all by the light of the Bible. Test all in the crucible of the Bible. That which can abide the fire of the Bible, receive, hold, believe and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible, reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away” (Sermon - “Prove All Things” taken from [www.biblebb.com](http://www.biblebb.com)).

Thoroughly

“Test” or “examine” Gr.dokimazo, “a common New Testament word that often refers to testing something for authenticity. It entails distinguishing between true and false, right and wrong, or good and bad. Sometimes the word denotes the process of distinguishing what is pleasing to the Lord” (John MacArthur, 1 & 2 Thesslonians, p.199).

What is taught – content (Acts 17:11 - Bereans)

Who is teaching – character (1 Tim.3; Tit.1)

This command is universal for every believer

It first starts with you - 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?--unless indeed you are disqualified.” It then branches out toward others. 1 John 4:1 tells us to “test the spirits.” 1 Corinthians 14:29 says, “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.” It is clear that this was the duty of early believers by what Jesus says to the church at Ephesus. In Revelation 2:2 Jesus said, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.” Even the Proverbs give this instruction in Proverbs 14:15 when it says, “The simple believes every word, But the prudent considers well his steps.”

Matthew Henry said, “It is folly to be credulous [easily convinced], to heed every flying report, to give ear to every man's story, though ever so improbable, to take things upon trust from common fame, to depend upon every man's profession of friendship and give credit to every one that will promise payment; those are simple who thus believe every word, forgetting that all men, in some sense, are liars in comparison with God, all whose words we are to believe with an implicit faith, for he cannot lie. 2. It is wisdom to be cautious: The prudent man will try before he trusts, will weigh both the credibility of the witness and the probability of the testimony, and then give judgment as the thing appears or suspend his judgment till it appears” (Matthew Henry Commentary).

In your thorough testing of all things you are to:

Include Everything

This permits no exceptions. It includes every issue and idea that might confront believers. J. Vernon McGee says, “Don't be taken in. To put it crudely, don't be a sucker. Don't be misled into

supporting a project just because somebody sends you a picture of pathetic looking orphans. Don't contribute to things you know nothing about. Don't fall for some promotion job. Investigate. Investigate anything to which you give your support. Christians ought not to be gullible. We are to prove all things. This also means that we are not to be taken in by flattery. There are many deceivers in the world” (Thru the Bible). A.T. Robertson said, “Even the gift of prophecy has to be tested to avoid error” (Robertson’s Word Pictures). Be careful even accepting “free Bible studies” that are distributed over the Internet. Be cautious about the world. Satan wants to invade your family. He will not be partial to any particular means. He will do that through what is taught in schools and day cares or through restrictions on your freedoms.

You’re hearing today that Islam is a peaceful loving religion, don’t believe it, it’s a lie — investigate their writings and understand their jihad. Mark Gabriel who was a former Muslim, able to quote the entire Quran by the time he was twelve years old was raised in Egypt – in the midst of a breeding ground of Islamic terrorists. He spent his formative years deep inside the confines of Muslim influence and was disowned by his family after he converted to Christianity. They have tried to kill him several time causing him to escape from his homeland to the United States.

He writes in his book, *Islam and Terrorists*, “Jihad is carried out in order to achieve the ultimate goal of Islam — to establish Islamic authority over the whole world” (37). He further states that “Muslims will lie and say things they do not believe at any moment as long as doing so would help Islam. Their loyalty is to Islam, not to the nation where they are living” (47).

It was clear from the movie *The Path to 9/11* that Islam hates all non-Muslims and wants them all dead or to convert to the Muslim religion.

Friday night on *Inside Edition* there was an American woman named Angie who converted from Christianity to Islam and stated that Islam is a religion of peace that has been “high jacked” by extremists. What she doesn’t understand is these “extremists” are doing what their religion demands—what the Quran says!

Jihad is “a command to all Muslims enforced by the Quran. The focus of jihad is to overcome people who do not accept Islam” (Gabriel, 33). The Quran says in Surah 4:89, “Those who reject Islam must be killed. If they turn back (from Islam), take (hold of) them and kill them wherever you find them.” Surah 47:4 says, “So, when you meet those who disbelieve, smite (their) necks till you have killed and wounded many of them, then bind a bond firmly (on them, i.e. take them as captives). Sound like a peaceful religion? Does this compare to the teachings of the Bible?

Even though Catholics do not practice this today, they were no different in their history. In their history, they killed everyone that opposed their beliefs. During Queen Mary’s reign of four years from 1553-1557, “two hundred and eighty-four people—men and women, old and young—were put to death” (Henry Charles Moore, *Through Flood and Flame*, 214). Prior to this time, *The New Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* says, “Up to about the 12<sup>th</sup> century, most of the persecutions against true

believers in Christ came from the pagan world, but now the church in Rome discarded the truths of the Scriptures and the commandments of love and took up the sword against all who opposed the false doctrines and traditions that had increasingly become part of it since the time of Constantine...For several centuries the papal church raged throughout the world like a hungry beast, slaughtering thousands of true believers in Christ and torturing and mutilating thousands more” (55-6).

On October 31, 1517 a young monk by the name of Martin Luther nailed his 95 thesis to the door of the castle chapel Wittenberg, Germany against the Catholic practices of selling indulgences. This sparked the Protestant Reformation. Luther is declared a heretic and is excommunicated in 1521. What lengths would you go to in defending the truth of the Bible?

We have to *test all things thoroughly. We have to test everything in its entirety.* We have to:

### **Hold Fast What is Good (v.21b)**

Once Believers Examine Everything They Must Then Hold Fast to That Which is Good.

“Hold fast” means, “to embrace wholeheartedly,” “to take possession of.” “Good” (Kalos) denotes what is inherently genuine, true, noble, and right, not just what might be beautiful in appearance.

When Believers Find What is Good, They Must Embrace It and Make It Their Own.

Paul told the believers at Rome to “cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9). He said, “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.”

“Good” as defined here is the opposite of evil. In Romans 16:19 Paul concluded his letter by telling them “to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil.” Paul’s desire was “that they should be quite unknowing and unpracticed in the ways of sin” (Haldane, R. (1996). An exposition of Romans (electronic ed.) (Ro 16:20). Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation)

John MacArthur says, “To be innocent in what is evil is not to be ignorant of it or to disregard it. We cannot abhor evil unless we have some idea of what it is. But, to use a popular analogy, the only reliable way to recognize a counterfeit bill is to be completely familiar with the genuine bill. The only reliable way to recognize evil is to be thoroughly familiar with the good, and the only reliable way to learn what is good is to learn God’s Word” (MacArthur, J. (1996, c1991, c1994). Romans. Chicago: Moody Press).

In Philippians 4:8 Paul said to think or mediate on that which is good. He says, “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—meditate on these things.”

The Bible is very narrow on what it teaches. We're to embrace it fully and reject everything that opposes it. That is what the Muslims are doing. They are embracing fully what they believe and opposes anything that comes against it. Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons and every other cult and ism is doing the same. They embrace what they believe and oppose anything that comes against it. But what they are embracing is the lies of the devil. As we examine and test everything, we test it against what the Bible says not what we think to be true. There is only one truth and one way. All others are false. God's Word is the truth (Jn.17:17). God is true and can never lie. Titus 1:2 says God “cannot lie.” Jesus is the only way to heaven (Jn.14:6)

Remember what J.C. Ryal said, “Prove all things by the Word of God. All ministers, all teaching, all preaching, all doctrines, all sermons, all writings, all opinions, all practices – prove all by the Word of God. Measure all by the measure of the Bible. Compare all with the standard of the Bible. Weigh all in the balances of the Bible. Examine all by the light of the Bible. Test all in the crucible of the Bible. That which can abide the fire of the Bible, receive, hold, believe and obey. That which cannot abide the fire of the Bible, reject, refuse, repudiate, and cast away.”

So what God calls evil we must abstain from. What God calls good we must embrace. What God calls truth we must stand on with conviction. We must oppose all false teaching. We must be able to discern between what is true and what is false.

In other words, we are to test all things, hold fast what is good and *abstain from every form of evil*.

### **Abstain From Every Form of Evil (v.22)**

This Means Believers Are to Hold Themselves Away From Evil.

“Abstain” Gr.apecho, is a strong word that means “to hold oneself away from.” “The emphasis is on the believer's complete avoidance of any evil teaching or behavior” (MacArthur). This is the same word used in 1 Thess.4:3, “abstain from sexual immorality,” and 1 Pet.2:11, “abstain from the passions of the flesh.” “It calls for a radical separation from ‘every form of evil.’ This word includes evil behavior, of course. But in this context, the primary reference seems to be evil teaching — false doctrine.

Having examined everything in light of God's Word, when you identify something that does not measure up—something that is evil, untrue, erroneous, or contrary to sound doctrine—shun it” (John MacArthur, Fools Gold, 31).

Nowhere does Scripture permit believers to expose themselves to the influences of what is false or evil.

Instead they are to “abstain” from such things, even flee them. 1 Timothy 6:11 says, “But you, O man of God, flee these things [“useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth” (v.5), “the love of money” (v.10)] and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.” 2 Timothy 2:22 says, “Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” Proverbs 8:13 says “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverse mouth I hate.”

Evil Refers to Something That is Actively Harmful or Malignant.

Such evil, which includes lies and distortions of truth as well as moral perversions, appears in many forms. Matthew 5:11 refers to “reviling, persecution, saying all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.” Matthew 15:19 refers to “evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.” Colossians 3:5 says refers to “fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, covetousness.”

Paul warned the Thessalonians to shun “every form of evil.” This was a general call for believers to “discern truth from error, good from evil, righteousness from sin, and a command to shun any of the negative teachings, influences, or behaviors that would displease God” (John MacArthur, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, p.200).

## CONCLUSION

If we’re going to be a discerning church, we have to return to the commitment that compromise is unacceptable. We have to affirm that testing all things is biblical. Discerning between truth and error is loving. Where’s your discernment? Are you testing all things, holding fast to that which is good, and abstaining from every form of evil? If so, then you are being discerning. If not, you are compromising biblical truth! How can we correct the greatest problem facing the church? By affirming these things. We’re here to help you understand biblical truth. If you’re struggling with compromise, I would like to pray with you. If you’re here without Christ in need of forgiveness of your sin, I would like to pray with you and show what God says in His Word regarding the forgiveness of sin. Let’s pray.

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