

**Concluding Exhortations and Commandments (6):
“Test everything; hold fast what is good”**

Introduction:

We were unable to complete our notes last Lord’s Day. We had intended to address the three commands expressed in 1 Thessalonians 5:20 and 21. In these two verses we have three of the eighteen exhortations and commandments of this concluding section of this epistle. These three commands read as follows in the English Standard Version (ESV):

#13, #14, and #15. ²⁰“Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good.” I would like to add a fourth command to this discussion, which is **#16**, which reads, “**Abstain from every form of evil.**”

Last week we managed to address only the first of these, “*Do not despise prophecies.*” We will not rehearse today the main points that we covered. But by way of application for us, to despise not prophecies is to despise not the teaching of the Bible. We can say this for the entire Bible, the Holy Scriptures, is the product of inspired prophecy through many prophets. Hebrews 1:1 speaks to this:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers *by the prophets*,² has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...

“In time past” refers to the record we have of the Old Testament; the “last days spoken to us by His Son” may be applied to the New Testament Scriptures.

We are commanded, “*Do not despise prophecies.*” Peter also declared the Scriptures to be the product of “prophecy.” In 1 Peter 1:19ff he wrote that the Holy Scriptures were more authoritative than even his visual witness of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. He said of the Bible:

And we have something more sure, *the prophetic word*, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰knowing this first of all, that no *prophecy of Scripture* comes from someone’s own interpretation. ²¹For no *prophecy* was ever produced by the will of man, but *men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* (2 Pet. 1:19-21)

Notice that Peter refers to the Holy Scriptures as “*the prophetic Word.*” And he called every portion of the Bible “*prophecy of Scripture.*” And then he wrote that no portion of the Bible, no “*prophecy*”, was produced by man’s will, but men wrote their words by the Holy Spirit who superintended their writing. Peter affirmed the authority of this prophetic word for Christians until the return of Jesus Christ.

We see that because the Holy Scriptures are the product of prophecy and the Bible is a collection of numerous prophecies, therefore, the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:20, “*Do not despise prophecies*”, speaks to the authority of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is God’s depository of spiritual truth conveyed through His prophets. The Holy Scriptures are His authoritative instruction to His people. Do not despise the teachings, that is, the doctrines taught in the Bible.

Now you may recall from last week that we had set forth a number of different translations of these verses, comparing and contrasting the punctuation provided by the translators. Here they are once again:

KJV. “Quench not the Spirit. ²⁰Despise not prophesyings. ²¹Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. ²²Abstain from all appearance of evil. (4 sentences)

NKJV. “Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies. ²¹Test all things; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.” (4 sentences)

ESV. “Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²²Abstain from every form of evil.” (3 sentences)

NASV. “Do not quench the Spirit; ²⁰do not despise prophetic utterances. ²¹But examine everything *carefully*; hold fast to that which is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.” (2 sentences)

RSV. “Do not quench the Spirit, ²⁰do not despise prophesying, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good, ²²abstain from every form of evil.” (1 sentence)

Greek NT. τὸ πνεῦμα μὴ σβέννυτε, ²⁰προφητείας μὴ ἐξουθενεῖτε, ²¹πάντα δὲ δοκιμάζετε, τὸ καλὸν κατέχετε, ²²ἀπὸ παντὸς εἴδους πονηροῦ ἀπέχεσθε.

The punctuation of these translations reveals how the translators understood the relationship of these verses to one another. Again, we see that the translators of the KJV and the NKJV believed that each of these commands stands alone, independent of each other--each verse is an independent sentence (except for v. 21). The ESV, which we have been using, links 3 clauses together: “Do not despise prophecies, ²¹but test everything; hold fast what is good.” But the ESV then separates verse 22 as a separate sentence: “Abstain from every form of evil.” But the more I consider the relationship of these commands, I am persuaded that the punctuation of both the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and that of the editors of the Greek New Testament best reflect the relationship and the connection of these commands with one another. Verse 22 follows from verses 20 and 21. It may be stated this way: “Test everything, holding fast to what is good, abstaining from every form of evil.” Testing everything is to distinguish these two things from one another, the good and the evil.

In order to give the sense of the larger context, we propose this paraphrase:

“Do not quench the Spirit, even the words of prophesy that He has inspired, but rather by His Holy Word test everything, discerning and distinguishing between what is good and what is evil, embracing the good, but rejecting that which is evil.”

In these verses, therefore, we have the authority of the Holy Scriptures affirmed to us and that our entire life should be characterized by filtering all things through His Holy Word, in order to understand what we are to believe and to know how we are to live.

Now let us pick up where we left off last week, but we will expand on what we gave in last week’s notes. We read in 1 Thessalonians 5:21a:

#14. “But test everything” (5:21a)

Here we have a command that we, that is, every individual Christian, is to practice: “Test everything.” This betrays a very important principle of biblical Christianity, the responsibility of personal, private judgment in all matters of life. This principle has not always been observed in history, and I would argue, that it is a principle that is not commonly observed in our society today. **J. C. Ryle**, the reformed Anglican Church leader of the latter 19th century, wrote of this principle and how it was vital to Protestant life and practice. Rather than relegating all matters of decision as to what is right or wrong to a hierarchy of church leaders, Protestants emphasized the individual’s right and responsibility to assess and determine issues of truth and error. Ryle wrote these words:

There were three great doctrines, or principles, which won the battle for the Protestant Reformation. These three were: (1) the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture, (2) the right of private judgment, and (3) justification by faith only, without the deeds of the law.

These three principles were the keys to the whole controversy between the Reformers and the Church of Rome. If we keep firm hold of them when we argue with a Roman Catholic, our position is unassailable: no weapon that the Church of Rome can forge against us will prosper. If we give up any one of them, our cause is lost. Like Samson with his hair shorn, our strength is gone. Like the Spartans, betrayed at Thermopylae, we are out-flanked and surrounded. We cannot maintain our ground. Resistance is useless. Sooner or later we shall lay down our arms and surrender at discretion.

Let us carefully remember this. The Roman Catholic controversy is upon us once more. We must put on the whole armour if we would not have our faith overthrown. The sufficiency of the Holy Scripture, the right of private judgment, justification by faith only—these are the three great principles to which we must always cling. Let us grasp them firmly, and never let them go.

One of the three great principles to which I have referred appears to me to stand forth in the verse of Scripture which heads this paper. I mean the right of private judgment. I wish to say something about this principle.

The Holy Ghost, by the mouth of the St. Paul, says to us, “Prove all things; hold fast to what is good.” In these words we have two great truths.

I. The right, duty, and necessity of private judgment: “Prove all things.”

II. The duty and necessity of keeping firm hold upon the truth: “Hold fast that which is good.”¹

Ryle then set forth in 18 pages of text the nature and importance of this matter. In which he emphasized these points:

When I say the *right* of private judgment, I mean that 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.

When I say the duty of private judgment, I mean that God requires every Christian man to use the right of which I have just spoken; to compare man’s words and man’s writings with God’s revelation, and to make sure that he is not deluded and taken in by false teaching.

And when I say the *necessity* of private judgment, I mean this, that it is absolutely needful for every Christian who loves his soul and would not be deceived to exercise the right, and discharge the duty, to which I have referred; seeing that experience shows that the neglect of private judgment has always been the cause of immense evils in the Church of Christ.²

If I were to amend what Ryle has written, I would not change any of his words, but I would broaden the scope of his comments. Yes, every one of us is to test all things regarding matters of spiritual truth, but we are to go beyond the arena of the teaching of the church, we are to test “everything.” All aspects of life, both in the church and in the world, are to be assessed by us, so that we might “hold fast what is good.”

As Christians, we are not to be gullible, accepting everything and anything which is set before us, embracing all of what we are taught, accepting all that is presented to us. Christians are to “test everything”, and we are to use the Holy Scriptures as the standard by which we test everything. The purpose and performance our testing is in order to distinguish between what is good and what is evil. We are to be in the business of assessing and evaluating what we see, what we hear, and what we read. We are to determine what is good and what is evil, clearly distinguishing the two, sharply separating the two. Each of us is accountable to God. Each of us has this responsibility entrusted to us by God, to “test everything.”

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Knots Untie; Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion From the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman* (Charles Nolan Publishers, 2000), pp. 45f.

² *Ibid*, p. 46.

The Scriptures speak forthrightly of the need of God's people to be discerning in order that they may understand fully the will of God for their lives. This is essential for there is tendency to embrace error to our detriment. This is so due to ignorance of truth, the craftiness of deceivers, and our own susceptibility to being deceived.

The Bible refers frequently to discernment as the responsibility to make judgments of what is good and evil, true and false, right and wrong. The two words in Scripture that are most frequently used to connote this process are the Hebrew word *bin* in the Old Testament and the Greek word *diakrino* in the New Testament. According to **Jay Adams** in his book, *A Call to Discernment*, the Hebrew word is used 247 times in the Old Testament.³ The word has been translated variously as “understand, discern, and distinguish.” When it is used, the Hebrew word *bin* conveys the idea “to separate things from one another at their points of difference in order to distinguish them.” Adams goes on to write that “it refers to the process by which one comes to know or understand God's thoughts and ways through separating those things that differ.”⁴ The Greek word is used similarly in the New Testament. It, too, refers to a process of separating or discriminating whereby truth may be set apart in relief from that which is false. In short, discernment is a filtering process by which a person distinguishes and separates good from the bad, right from wrong, and truth from error.

The New Testament teaches that the ability to discern is the measure of the maturity of a Christian. To become a discerning Christian is what it is to become a mature Christian. To be an undiscerning Christian is to be an immature Christian, even to be as a baby in the faith. Let us consider this in the light of **Hebrews 5:11-14**. The writer was speaking of the Old Testament person of Melchizedek and how he prefigured our Lord Jesus in His priestly ministry:

(Melchizedek) of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in *the word of righteousness*, for he is a babe. ¹⁴But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who *by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*. (Heb 5:11-14)

The writer was addressing Hebrew Christians of the first century who were under the threat of persecution for their faith. They faced the temptation of escaping hardship by renouncing Christ and returning to Judaism, which was an accepted and legal religion of the Roman Empire. The writer set forth a word of exhortation to them, urging them to persevere in their faith to Jesus Christ. There was no return to Judaism possible. Christ and the salvation He brought had fulfilled Old Testament Jewish religion. Among the many arguments the writer set forth was to show how superior Christ's high priesthood was to the Levitical priesthood of the old covenant. The ministry of Christ as a high priest resembled that of the Old Testament priest Melchizedek, who was neither a descendant of Abraham nor a Levite. But the writer paused, and gave a rebuke to his readers. For although the matters he discussed were complex, they would not have posed difficulty for the Hebrews to understand had they not been “*dull of hearing*” (5:11). Furthermore, the writer rebuked them, for they were but babies, when they should have long since become mature teachers (5:12). The writer then explained what constitutes maturity in verses 13 and 14: “For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for *the mature*, who “*because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil*.” The measure of Christian maturity, by definition, is the ability to exercise discernment.

The writer to the Hebrews rebuked his readers for being undiscerning Christians--they were mere babies when they should have been teachers (Hebrews 5:11-14). One cause for the deficiency of these Christians was that they were “not accustomed to the word of righteousness.” We should probably not understand the phrase, the “word of righteousness” as a direct reference to Scripture, but rather to the body of teaching (doctrine) which was “Christian”--the content of “the” faith of Christianity. This “word” was the

³ Jay Adams, *A Call for Discernment* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1987), p. 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*

standard by which they were to make judgments; however, they were “unaccustomed”, or unfamiliar with it, and as a result they were unable to distinguish “good from evil.” Due to their ignorance of the substance of their faith--Christian doctrine--and their failure to apply it--to distinguish “good from evil”--they were endangering themselves.

The New Testament writers frequently described in other terms what the writer to the Hebrews identified as “the word of righteousness.” Repeatedly the New Testament gives reference to a collection of teachings (i.e. doctrines), which was entrusted to Christians to maintain and pass on to the next generation. This body of teaching is described in various ways. It is “the word” which was handed down by “eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:1, 2) and preached to the early church (1 Peter 1:25). This teaching was described as “the truth” (2 Tim. 2:18), the “traditions” he had passed on to the church of the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 2:15), and “the faith” or “the things you have learned and become convinced of” (2 Tim. 3:8, 14). Jude wrote of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” which needed to be contended for lest the message be lost through corruption of its content (Jude 3, 4).

We find the same link between discernment and spiritual maturity in **Ephesians 4:11-16**.

And He Himself (the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus) gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, ¹³till we all come to the unity of *the faith* and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *to a perfect* (mature) *man*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴that we should no longer be *children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, ¹⁵but, speaking *the truth* in love, *may grow up in all things into Him* who is the head-- Christ-- ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph. 4:11)

We see that the chief responsibility of the early apostles and prophets, and of the continuing role and function of evangelists, pastors and teachers, is to bring the people of God to the “unity of the faith.” What this means is that the people of God are to be taught the Word of God, so that they understand the doctrines of Scripture, “the faith”, to which the Holy Scriptures bear witness. Consider the wording of verse 14 carefully: Paul identifies undiscerning persons as “*children*” in need of growth who are “*tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*” Again, to increase in the ability to discern is to move toward spiritual maturity. It is by the knowledge of sound, biblical doctrine, that Christians “grow up unto Him”, that is, grow into mature Christians. Having been grounded and edified in the faith, they will no longer be “children”, unsettled or deceived by every wind of false doctrine.

But sadly, there are churches and preachers, as well as many, many Christians have adopted the belief that doctrine is something that should not be emphasized in the church, for it results in disagreement, dissension, and division. I learned last week of a pastor in our area who intentionally avoids emphasis and clarity in doctrine, for he desires “to minister to a broader group of people.” He knows intuitively that doctrinal preaching will not be received and welcomed by all, so he avoids these matters in his preaching.

Now we would acknowledge that, in one sense doctrine is divisive, but it is supposed to be! The Lord is in the separation business in His churches, that is, He would be if we were faithfully proclaiming His word. He would have us proclaim the truth in its entirety, without apology, and do so continuously. And when we do so, His truth will divide and separate the people of God from all others. But again, take note of what Paul wrote here in Ephesians 4. Sound doctrine is the ground on which unity is to be built; we are to be striving to “the unity of the faith.” If we are not doctrinal in our preaching and teaching in our churches, there is something terribly deficient and errant about us. The “unity” we may think we have, is not a unity of “the faith”, rather, there is something else holding the people together.

What is the standard with which we are to test all things? The Holy Scriptures is the rule by which we assess all things. Historically for Protestants, the Scriptures have always been the standard by which all claims of spiritual truth are to be tested and assessed. But sadly, in the days in which we live “the faith”

suffers in ways that are reflected in the New Testament. There are false teachers who are corrupting “the faith” in ways similar to what Jude described, who are “turning the grace of God into a license to sin” (Jude 3). The faith is suffering terribly because pastors are failing to “hand down” the “teaching” (i.e. doctrine) to their congregations; now they deliver therapeutic talks, substituting this for the preaching of the faith (1 Tim. 4:3). There are those that blatantly deny long-held tenants of the faith--salvation by grace alone, justification through faith alone, and the authority of the Scriptures alone. But perhaps the greatest cause for failure is ignorance, and the failure to correct it. People simply do not know what they believe or what they *should* believe. There is ignorance and error. In today’s Christianity there is an absence of the definite and precise, an ignorance of what God has revealed of Himself and His purposes. Consequently there is no context by which to assess matters. In other words, because of an absence of a sound biblically based theology, churches are unable to discern truth from error, right from wrong, and good from evil. This situation must be corrected.

#15 & #16. “Hold fast what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” (v. 21).

We are to screen all of life through a spiritual filter, which is the Word of God. We are to be a discerning people, separating that which is true from false, right from wrong, good from bad. We are to cleave to that which is good and we are to reject that which is bad.

There is a technical term that is sometimes used to describe this kind of thinking. In order to be a discerning people, we are to think *antithetically*. What does this mean? To think antithetically is to view matters in terms of contrasts or opposites, based on an understanding of certain absolutes respecting truth and error, right and wrong, and good and evil. One who views the world in this manner will recognize and highlight contrasts, rather than similarities. A person who thinks antithetically will see contrasts in issues of morality and truth. Things are seen as black and white rather than shades of grey. He will recognize logical inconsistencies and see deviation from Scriptural norms everywhere he turns.

In contrast, a person who does not think antithetically will tend to view matters as *relatively*. Issues of this life are as points on a long line so it is difficult even impossible to make distinctions. Although someone may affirm there is such a thing as truth, right, and the good, generally these are indistinguishable because they are so mixed with error, wrong, and evil. So, since there is some good in all and everything, and there is some bad in all and everything, so one cannot distinguish clearly these matters. “Besides,” one might reason, “it serves no real purpose if one could do so, therefore, we should ‘live and let live.’ I’m okay and you’re okay and we will mutually ignore what may be not okay within each of us.”

The person who thinks *antithetically* will be seen as a maverick, perhaps stubborn, intolerant, and uncompromising, and certainly unloving. He will be thought of as “a hater.” He will be seen as a loner who has a tendency to alienate others from himself. But the person who is *relativistic* in thinking will be seen as a one who gets along with everybody, is co-operative, tolerant of everybody and everything, and is one who can work in just about any kind of situation with any group of people. It is easy to see which kind of person will be most liked and lauded by the world and which one would be viewed as a troublesome figure that stirs controversy wherever he has input. Our Lord Jesus said it this way regarding the world’s opinion of Him and His servants,

¹⁷“These things I command you, that you love one another. ¹⁸If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me. ²²If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³He who hates Me hates My Father also. ²⁴If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. ²⁵But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, ‘They hated Me without a cause.’” (John 15:17-25)

The fallen world hates God and hates God's Son. And when the Lord's people are viewed by the fallen world as representing Him and are promoting His words, the world will hate them also. But when our speech, our opinions, and our ways are like the world, the world will love us. But you will not be loved of the Father by aligning yourself with the world. "Whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). We are to distinguish ourselves by holding to and promoting that which is "good" and by abstaining from that which is "evil."

Now it is the way of the fallen world way to blur and conceal, to integrate and merge, to grow larger and become more diffuse. It is the will of God for the people of God to employ the Word of God to clarify and reveal, to distinguish and separate, to refine and become purer. "*Test all things; hold fast what is good; abstain from that which is evil.*" The world knows nothing of this these days. The world with its perverted view of love and permissiveness and tolerance has legitimized all manner of things that were formerly and universally regarded as deviant, devilish, and disgusting. The world tells us that we must not place a value on ideas, that some opinions are better and truer than others. Rather, "we must respect and value all people's views." With this kind of mindset, there is a tendency not to take a stand on issues, but to allow and even rejoice in things that should be a source of shame and contempt. Sadly, all too many who claim to be Christians have embraced this way of thinking.

When we awaken each morning we face the world before us. We are to engage the world by assessing whatever we encounter or experience as we measure it according to God's Word, the Bible. We are to make judgments with respect to every aspect of life as to whether or not it is good or evil. Throughout each day we are to be filtering what we see, hear, read, what we think, how we behave, and how others behave, whether or not they are good or evil. And as we make these assessments, we are to then to hold fast or affirm in our souls that which is good; we are to reject or abstain from every form of evil that we identify.

Now, we should emphasize that *discernment is a function of the mind*. Some believe that discernment is a sensitized or intuitive *feeling* as to whether or not something is good or evil. Some believe that they have been given a special gift of God that enables them just to know in their "heart" when something is true or false. "I just sensed in my spirit that he was wrong or his teaching was wrong." And although some in the apostolic age were given the spiritual gift of discerning spirits, we would argue that is not the norm for today. Rather, we are to measure all things according to God's revealed and written Word. This work of discernment, therefore, involves the mind.

And yet we would assert that discernment is not merely a function of the mind. Discernment is a *spiritual work* that involves the mind to ascertain what is true. And as a spiritual work, only the Spirit of God can illuminate the mind, thereby enabling us to make proper judgments. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:11-14,

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, *that we might know* the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those *taught by the Spirit*, combining *spiritual thoughts* with *spiritual words*. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

Take note, and this is important: the mind is still in the process. One must "understand" with the mind, but understanding can only come through the illuminating work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit illuminates the mind with spiritual words--words of Scripture--as they are pondered.

I found that when believers fail to employ their mind in assessing a teaching or an action in the light of the written Word of God, they are in actuality judging according to their own limited experience and according to the teaching that they have previously embraced. When they respond to a teaching, "I just feel in my spirit that is wrong", usually they are being confronted with a doctrine they have not heard before—it is new and therefore strange to them—or the teaching runs counter to their sinful nature—they don't like it so they wrongly assume it is wrong. The fact is that our experience and our intuition are not valid or a

suitable testing mechanisms to determine what is true and good. The Scriptures alone are the standard that we are to employ to assess “all things.”

When we refer to the Bible as the Christian “canon” this is what we are asserting (not to be confused with cannon—two n’s, referring to an artillery piece. The word canon is from the Greek language. It referred to a reed or cane that was used as a measuring stick. To determine the length or the straightness of a thing, it would be measured against a *canon*. Our Bible is the standard of measure by which we are to assess the correctness of “all things.”

Sadly, *even among Christians there is widespread reluctance and failure to test all things, that is, make moral and spiritual judgments about matters.* One of the most damaging and Biblically errant notions among Christians today is that believers are not suppose to make judgments respecting other people. This is frequently heard: “I am not to judge,” or, it may be worded like this: “who am I to judge?” With this wrong view of the teaching of Scripture and wrong manner in which we relate to one another, we have forfeited God’s means of correcting much error and recovering many deceived and straying persons. In today’s churches Christians have purposely ceased to exercise thinking respecting questionable practices and persons. This “judge not” attitude has now become so “normal” that there is reluctance or refusal to confront Christians when they are seen acting in some blatantly sinful manner; to do so would be perceived as being *judgmental*. In these days there is very little true exhorting one another; consequently, there is much hardness (insensitivity) among us due to the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13). This is a masterstroke of the devil that he has brought upon God’s people. Because he has kept them from performing the work of discernment and acting upon it, he has placed many securely in his stocks. *If your attitude toward the world and Christians about you is never judge, never rebuke, never correct or condemn, then you are of little real service in God’s kingdom.* You are unable to provide true spiritual assistance to those about you. Perhaps you can provide comfort for others for having shared in their misery, but you will be unable to bring them to experience deliverance from their condition. But further, you yourself are *easy* prey to a deceiver; you will be *easily* led into false doctrine, for false teachers will readily beguile you.

One might argue, “But does not the Word of God say in Matthew 7:1, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged?’” Yes, but that verse and others like it is not condemning the work of discerning; rather, it is condemning a *ensorious* spirit, which is seen in one who, with a spirit of anger or intolerance, tries to dismiss or discredit other persons in order to damage their reputation or justify himself. To this kind of person the Lord says, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” A person who tries to pluck a splinter out of another person’s eye when he has a beam in his own is to be regarded as a hypocrite (Luke 6:42), but it is not the act of trying to remove a splinter, but the fact that he is equally at fault which reveals his hypocrisy. He is *first* to remove the log from his own eye “*then*” he will see clearly to remove the splinter that is in his brother’s eye (Luke 6:42). We are to be in the business of spotting and removing splinters--discerning and correcting errant belief and practice--but we are first to perform this work on ourselves.

Now it is true that the Scriptures tell us that *we are incapable of judging the desires and motives of hearts*; that is something only God can and will one day do. But we are *commanded* to make assessments, that is, judgments, respecting others’ and our attitudes, actions, and general character. How are you going to obey Titus 3:10 in rejecting a “*divisive*” person unless you first recognize and identify him as a divisive person? How are you to disassociate from a “*disorderly*” person described in 2 Thessalonians 3:6, unless you first assess one to be such? How are you to “*expose*” the “*unfruitful works of darkness*” (Eph. 5:11) unless you identify them when you see them? You must perform the work of discernment if you are to obey the Lord in these matters. The Bible commands us to be discerning people, and we are incapable of governing ourselves or of truly helping others if we are unable to do so. King Solomon became the wisest man who ever lived (excepting of course the Lord Jesus), because he sought wisdom from the Lord. He prayed to God, “*Give Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Thine?*” (1 Kings 3:9). Solomon could not rule his people without wisdom, and we cannot govern our lives without wisdom.

There are those who judge everything, including motives. This is wrong. These persons will tell you not only what a person is doing wrong, but specifically *why* he is doing it; that is, what is motivating him to do it. The Bible says that we cannot even know our own hearts, but there are some who set themselves up as judges of other men’s hearts claiming that they know why he or she behaves in such a manner. The

Scriptures say you do not know why a person acts the way he does and you should not make specific, authoritative judgments respecting such things. That is God's responsibility that will be brought to light in the Day of Judgment.

But again, there are those who judge nothing. This too, is wrong. These people would never say a bad thing about anybody or any action. These people attempt to accentuate the positive and only the positive. They never say anything negative, they never correct, never rebuke, never admonish or exhort others. Although they may have the best of intentions for others, they fail to be true help. *"He that rebukes a man afterwards shall find more favour than he that flatters with the tongue"* (Pro. 28:23).

Now an objection might be leveled by them,

"But does not the Scripture say in 1 Corinthians 4:5 'Judge *nothing* before the time? I follow that. I don't make any judgments. I leave that to the Lord."

What does 1 Corinthians 4:5 prohibit? It forbids that we judge the motives of people

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts; and then each one's praise will come from God.

We cannot judge motives, but we are commanded **to judge the actions and attitudes of people that may be clearly seen and assessed.** We are called upon to be a discerning people, discriminating between truth and error, right and wrong, good and evil. And although we are not to judge motives, we are unable to do so, we can and are to assess and make judgments about actions. Paul makes this clear in the next chapter of 1 Corinthians

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore *"put away from yourselves that wicked person."* (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

This condition in churches must be corrected. But how may it be corrected? There are no shortcuts. The comparison between physical growth and spiritual growth may be drawn. Just as a child would be unreasonable to think he will become an adult overnight, it would be foolish to think you can become a mature or discerning Christian in a short period of time. But unlike physical maturity, spiritual maturity can be accelerated. For the most part, physical maturation will occur even in the absence of a nutritious diet. But not so in the spiritual realm. Good, solid, spiritual nourishment is needed in order that true growth to maturity will occur. Reading the Scriptures. Listening intently to the Bible being taught. Meditating on what you hear. Analyzing your daily thoughts and experiences in the light of your understanding. Making firm conclusions about what is true and false, right and wrong. Rejecting what is wrong or evil, agreeing with God regarding His assessment of a thing, but embracing and delighting in that which is good and true.

We are to raise our children much like God raised Israel until the day of her maturity when Christ was sent into the world (cf. Gal. 4:1ff). God had immersed Israel in a context or a culture that would result in their viewing the world antithetically. The law of God is set forth to produce this kind of worldview. The law declared what was good and right and contrasted that with what was evil and false. The Israelite was trained to view his world in two ways and two ways only. His very life was characterized by what was clean and unclean. He had to make decisions respecting what was holy and what was unholy. Repeatedly God repeated before His people the blessing that faith and obedience brought, but also the curse and consequences that unbelief, disobedience and rebellion to God would bring upon them. Throughout God's law clear and uncompromising consequences of refusal and failure were set before the people. We are to follow a similar pattern in our homes with our children, particularly our young children. They need to have clearly defined

limits and boundaries placed upon them. Appropriate rewards should be given when cheerful compliance is rendered. But appropriate punishments and correction must be given when there is resistance and refusal to live within dad and mom's authority. Our values and standards must be consistently upheld and administered. As parents we are to establish our homes in righteousness and as long as our children are living within our homes they will live according to our standards. Gradually as our children grow we are to direct them to observe not our direct authority but rather God's direct authority over them through His Word. As they increasingly show responsible behavior governing themselves according to God's law, we extend them freedom, knowing that they will be wise in making decisions and self-governing themselves according to God's law and gospel which they have embraced as the standard for their lives.

And so, in all that we say and do respecting them, we are to set forth before them these truths: There are two ways of life and a choice must be made to walk with Christ according to truth and righteousness, choosing not to walk apart or contrary to Him. There are two categories of truth claims; one is indeed right, good, true, and, the other wrong, evil, and false. There are two categories of people—God's people and those who are not, and we must desire to belong to and desire to be with God's people. There are two destinies for mankind, heaven and hell, and all of life must be seen as a journey toward heaven. There are two sources of guidance that will direct our path—God's Word the Bible which will lead us into heaven, the way and views of the world that lead us into the grave and eternal damnation. There must be instilled in ourselves and our children a love for the truth, and a hatred of evil. If these desires and values are instilled in us, we will be blessed in our way.

Lastly, recognize that if we fail to abstain from all forms of evil, our ability to discern will be diminished. To the degree you indulge in evil, failing to abstain from it, you will become desensitized to what is good. The lines will blend. You will soon justify what you condemned not long ago. You may not think so. You may be like Hazael, when he was a young man reacted violently when Elisha the prophet told him he would be an exceedingly evil and cruel king, he responded, "But what, is thy servant a **dog**, that he should do this great thing?" If you fail or refuse to apply this principle in your life or in the life of your children, "*Test all things; hold fast what is good; abstain from every form of evil*", you cannot imagine where you or they will be in ten years, given the way of the world and our culture and our corrupt sinful nature that resonates with that fallen world and decaying culture.

May God have mercy upon us and spare us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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,²⁵
To God our Savior, Who alone is wise,
Be glory and majesty,
Dominion and power,
Both now and forever. Amen. (Jude 24)
