

Abhor that which is Evil, Cling to that which is Good

Text:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Introduction:

This will be the last in a series of sermons on the theme how to not waste your life. Each time we have examined one short imperative from one of the Apostle Paul's letters. This is the last, not because we have run out of texts, but because we have run out of time. Other texts could, no doubt, be added to the list. In fact, it would be interesting to let each one of you take a Sunday and give your text. I am sure that most of you could add something significant to what we have considered; something that you have discovered in your life-journey that is essential to making the most out of your God-given opportunities, or something that has kept you from straying onto byways that lead to nowhere.

The longer text we have read contains a series of what one older author called telegraphic message commands. I suppose to bring that up to date we might call them text message commands. As in the text we read last week from I Thessalonians 5 the Apostle reduces what he has to say to the bare essentials and states them in an easy to remember form. While we might have trouble memorizing this passage and keeping the various statements in the order

they are written, we need only read it carefully through a couple of times a day for a week for most of the commands to stick in our memory.

It is worth pointing out that this list contains in different words two of the three commands that we have looked at previously. Verse 11: “Do not be slothful in zeal, but fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” means essentially the same thing as “redeem the time”, and verse 12: “be constant in prayer” means the same thing as “pray without ceasing”. In this study I want us to focus on verse 9. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good”. As a fourth thing that will keep us from wasting the life that God has given us I want us to meditate on what it means to “abhor that which is evil”, and “hold fast to that which is good”

The first thing we need to observe about this text is that the first sentence: “Let love be genuine”, or as it is more literally translated elsewhere, “let love be without hypocrisy”, dominates the rest of the text. It would be awkward, but literal to translate this text: “Let love be without hypocrisy by” –

Abhorring that which is evil, and clinging to that which is good.

Showing brotherly affection to one another.

Outdoing one another in showing honor, etc.

In other words all of the rest of the commands in the passage are ways in which we demonstrate sincere love. We have amply established in the past that the ideal of the Christian life is a life of Christ-like love. As Paul states in I Timothy 1:5, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”. The goal of Christian instruction is always sincere love. A life of sincere love is a life in which the time is redeemed. It is a life, not wasted, but lived to the maximum.

All of the rest of the things that Paul commands us to do in this text are just demonstrations of the sincere love of Christ. Today let us think about the first in the list: “abhor that which is evil hold fast to that which is good.” The first thing I we notice about this sentence is that it uses strong words. Paul could have, for example, said: “prefer the good to the bad”. On a language scale this would put it toward the lower end, but the terms he uses, and the way he states it puts it at the high end of the language use scale. If we are to live lives of sincere love; if we are to redeem the time, we must not just avoid evil we must abhor it, and we must not just prefer the good we must be stuck to it. Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit chose the very words intended by God. As we saw last time he did not exaggerate. He says exactly, not just what he means, but what God wants us to understand, and in the matter of good and evil he draws the antithesis with very strong terms.

We should also point out that this is not something that it just stated one time in the Bible. This is not a peripheral instruction, but something that is central to the biblical revelation. Here are a few examples: Psalm 34:14 says: "Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it". Psalm 45:6-7 in describing the Messianic King says: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Hebrews 1:9 quotes this passage as a description of the Son, Jesus Christ. Christ is our example and he is described as having loved righteousness and hated wickedness." In Amos 5:14-15 after exposing the sins of Israel God shows them the way of repentance and return when he says: "Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." If time permitted we could add many other examples, but these are enough to establish the fact that God hates evil and loves righteousness and desires that we do the same. This is not arbitrary on God's part. He has good reasons for hating evil. Evil is the destruction of his creation. It is the disruption of his peace. All that is evil lies outside of his will and his Kingdom. When we pray "thy kingdom come", we are praying for the banishment and end of all that is evil. God is good; he is "light and in him is no darkness at all". To love God is to love the good that God is, and hence necessarily to abhor the evil that seeks to obscure the light of God, even when that evil is present in one's self.

What, you might ask, can I do to abhor evil and cleave to the good? Let me suggest two things. First we must have a clear idea of what is good and what is evil, and we can only do this by letting God who is the supreme good, and not the world which is tainted by evil, tell us. Secondly, we must focus on the good, cling to the good, and that good is embodied in Jesus Christ.

I. Let God be True

Paul states an essential principle in Romans 3:4 when he says: "let God be true and every man a liar". To know the good we must know God. But we live in a world tainted by evil, and it is easy for our sense of good and evil to be distorted by the corruption of the world. Just as a person conditioned to eating unhealthy food actually comes to find it normal, to enjoy it, and prefer it to nourishing food, so a person accustomed to the perversion of good that exists in a sinful world comes to find it normal and to think it good. The only remedy is an encounter with the truly good. This encounter comes through God's revelation. God has shown us the true, the righteous, and the good in Jesus Christ. He alone sets the standard. All that does not measure up to him is insufficient.

To love the good is to know God in Jesus Christ and to love him. When we do, we come to see all that is contrary to him and his kingdom of righteousness for the sources of destruction and disruption that they are. We come to abhor evil because we see it as standing in the way of God's kingdom. Hence, each time we pray for the coming of God's Kingdom we are expressing our abhorrence of evil and praying for its destruction. Each time we pray for God's will to be done we are praying for an end to all that is contrary to his will.

II. Focus on Christ

The best way to learn to abhor evil is not to focus on evil and its consequences, but to focus on God's revelation of righteousness in Jesus Christ. There is even something dangerous about becoming overly concerned about evil. There is a type of Christian who seems to love to hate evil, but who at the same time seems significantly deprived of love. Evil is by nature twisted and perverted. It is actually possible for us to become entwined in evil by being its enemy. So instead being the enemy of evil, be the friend of God. The person who makes it his aim to know Christ will inevitably shun evil, because evil will keep him from Christ. Follow the example of the Apostle Paul who said that his life goal was not to be the enemy of evil, but "to know Christ."

The word that is translated "to hold fast to" literally means to be stuck to. If we are stuck to Christ, the revelation and embodiment of good in the most absolute sense we will recognize evil when it is present and abhor it.

Conclusion:

We need to conclude with a final word of caution. While we are to abhor evil, we are never to hate people. Evil is a part of the present human state of existence, but an unnatural and unnecessary part. None of us are free from it. As I have already stated this means hating it, even and perhaps most of all, when it is present in me. This is a part of what Jesus meant when he talked about removing the beam from our own eye before attacking the splinter in our brother or sister's eye. We must see evil as something that doesn't belong in God's creation; something that impedes the establishment of God's *shalom*. It is our longing for things to be as they should be that makes us loathe the things that keeps them from being thus. We hate evil the way we hate disease. All of us understand that hating the malady that is destroying our own life or the life of our loved one derives from our love for the one being destroyed by the disease. Evil is moral disease. It is something that shouldn't exist; something we want to go

away so God's Kingdom can come, and while evil will not be a part of that kingdom our desire is that those persons who are affected by it will be.