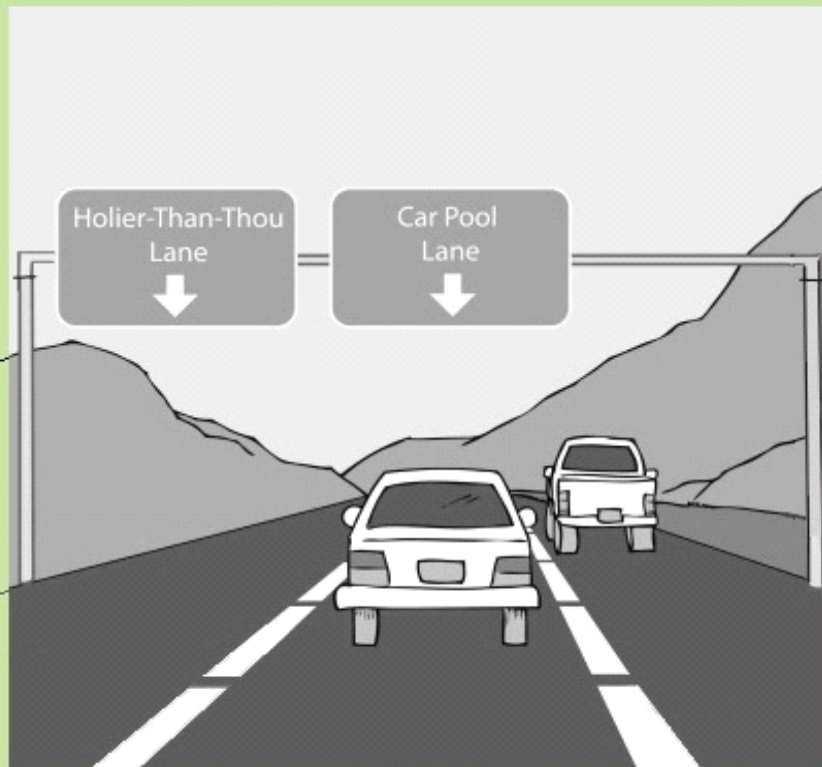


# THE SIN SNIFFER'S CATCH-ALL VERSE



**Main Entry:**

**holier-than-thou**

**Part of Speech:**

**adjective**

**Definition:**

**self-righteously pious**

**Synonyms:**

**artificial, goody-goody,  
high-hat, judgmental,  
pietistic,  
sanctimonious,  
simon-pure, smug,  
snobbish, unctuous**

## 1 Thessalonians 5:22— The Sin Sniffer's Catch-All Verse

The text reads in the King James Version, "Abstain from all appearance of evil." It is the sin sniffer's catch-all verse. Do you know what a "Sin Sniffer" is...well, stay tuned listeners, because this week's program will answer that question and many others about "gray areas" of ethical and moral behavior. This week we will also deal with a similar topic, which is that of "Twisting Scripture". The purpose of this show is to challenge certain popular interpretations of the Bible that really have little or no basis in it.

A friend of mind attended a Christian liberal arts college. She told me that the students there had scores of little oral traditions that helped them obey God. She and her husband still joke about them today. Their favorite was this: "You should pray over a meal if it cost more than 50 cents or if you have to eat it with a fork." Where is that in the Bible? No place, of course, but the students evidently felt that it was a necessary add-on for their sanctification.

I too, have been exposed to such oral traditions. Over the years we have seen and heard far too many sermons that extol the virtues of avoiding the appearance of evil. I remember that years ago in many a church the pastors would frequently preach on the evils of going to movies, or dancing, or drinking or smoking, or even wearing dresses with hems higher than 3" above the shoe top. Nowadays, such sermons are usually considered passe'. Instead, there are new laundry lists that ask various questions about an activity such as "Is it honoring to God? Might it harm a weaker brother or sister? Is it the best use of your time? Does it promote the cause of Christ? Does it avoid the appearance of evil?" Such lists usually address activities that are considered "grey areas" for a believer's ethical and moral stance. Thus, the Bible does not explicitly forbid them. Perhaps originally these checklists were designed to cause one to pause and reflect on an activity before following one's own conscience in the matter. But, as is often the case, they have become a way of imposing one person's conscience on another. In effect, they are oral traditions that are extra-biblical, palmed off as though a mark of wisdom and maturity. In other words, they are often a weaker brother's or sister's attempt to enforce a kind of legalism on those who have fewer scruples about such grey areas.

The net effect of such lists is to cast the Christian faith in a negative light and to paralyze the saints from becoming involved in people's lives. Now please don't misunderstand: I am not advocating that one ought to live in the grey areas! Anything in excess (except worship of God, which, in reality can't be in excess) is to be avoided. For example, I like chocolate. A lot. I find nothing in Scripture that says I should avoid chocolate at all costs. Indeed, 1 Tim 4:4 seems to imply that I have personal freedom in this matter: "Everything created by God is good; and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving." But what if I eat a pound of chocolate a day? Besides the fact that my teeth will rot and I'll soon look like a blimp, such an activity would begin to control my life. I would become enslaved to it. "Whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved" (2 Pet 2:19). Eating chocolate is okay; devouring the stuff till it devours me is not.

This morning I am not talking about excess in the grey areas; I am addressing rather our occasional forays into them. The issues here are much larger than can be addressed in a short half hour show. Suffice it to say there that those who **do not** want other Christians to enjoy life, and they use 1 Thess 5:22 as their ultimate weapon. "Abstain from all appearance of evil." It is the sin sniffer's catch-all verse.

Those that are in Seminary Schools would take a good look at English translation and would find that the word "appearance" is most often translated as "mint", having to do with coinage. What is interesting to note is that in the early church, the wording of 1 Thess 5:21 was more often attributed to Jesus than to Paul. And it was prefaced by the words "become approved money-changers." This then was followed by

the words “by abstaining from evil things and by holding fast to the good.” Thus, Paul may well be quoting from a previously unrecorded saying of Jesus in 1 Thess 5:21-22. If so, then these verses need to be rendered as follows: “Test all things; hold fast to the good, but abstain from every false coinage.” The idea then is that believers ought to stay away from that which is counterfeit - that is, false doctrine.

This interpretation is confirmed in the overall context: in verses 19-20 Paul gives the pithy instruction: “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances.” This is followed by a contrasting *dev* (“but”) that leads off verse 21: “but test all things.” Clearly, the context has to do with exercising discernment when it comes to spiritual instruction. The Thessalonians are instructed to heed the Spirit’s guidance and listen to the words of prophets. At the same time, they are not to accept everything gullibly, but are to “test all things.” They should then keep the good and throw out the bad. Thus, verse 22 has the idea of “stay away from bad doctrine.” The instruction in verses 19-22, then, has nothing to do with lifestyle per se.

Suppose that our interpretation of these verses is wrong. Suppose that counterfeiting coins is not in the background of 1 Thess 5:22. If so, does this necessarily mean that believers are to avoid every appearance of evil? In order for that to be the meaning, three other things must line up:

- (1) “form” must lack correspondence to reality (like the word “appearance” seems to do in the KJV translation);
- (2) Verse 22 must be interpreted in isolation from verses 19-21; and
- (3) We would expect to see examples, in the life of Paul and others in the NT, of avoiding the appearance of evil.

Even if a case could be made for the first and second points, the third point fails miserably. Paul was noted for becoming all things to all men (1 Cor 9:20-22) for the sake of the gospel. He often did things that certain sin-sniffers viewed as lacking propriety (see Gal 2). But he did them both because of his passion for the gospel and because of “our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:4).

But Paul is not the supreme example of one who did not avoid the appearance of evil. Jesus is. He spent so much time with tax-collectors and sinners that he was labeled a glutton and a drunkard (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Indeed, his very first miracle was to change water into wine (John 2), enabling the festivities to keep going. **The distinct impression one gets from the Gospels is that Jesus simply did not have the same scruples about his associations that the religious leaders of the day had.** They avoided the appearance of evil at all costs; Jesus seems almost to have had the opposite approach to life and ministry (see, Luke 7:39). Even his disciples had been oppressed by all the rules and traditions of men. But Jesus freed them from such nonsense. In Matt 15, the Pharisees were stunned that Jesus’ disciples did not perform the Jewish hand washing ritual before they ate. They hammered on the disciples and on Jesus for not obeying the oral commandments. Jesus did not say, “Sorry, boys. I didn’t mean to cause offense. It won’t happen again.” **Instead, he very boldly pointed out that these religious leaders had exchanged the laws of God for their own self-made rules.** He called them hypocrites who had no heart for God. The most remarkable verse in this whole pericope is verse 12: Jesus’ disciples came to their Master and said, “Did you know that the Pharisees were offended by what you just said?” Didn’t they know that offending the Pharisees was part of Jesus’ job description!

It is evident that our Lord enjoyed life and enjoyed it fully (see Luke 5:29-34). Restoring the *Imago Dei* to the way God intended it leads to such enjoyment of life. It is no wonder that Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:30), and “I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Oral traditions that heap requirements on people because of some outspoken individual’s overbearing conscience are an anathema to the Lord and to the evangelical faith. May ours be, once again, a robust faith and a life of enjoyment of God and of the good gifts he bestows on us.

In conclusion, 1 Thess 5:22 is apparently **talking about staying away from false teaching and has**

**nothing to do with lifestyle per se.** It should be translated, "Abstain from every form of evil" or "Abstain from every false coinage [i.e., false doctrine]." Further, to wield it as a weapon of legalism is against the general tenor of the New Testament and of the Lord's life in particular. **Ironically, to avoid every appearance of evil is far more in keeping with the Pharisees' model of righteousness than with Jesus'!**

The Westminster Shorter Catechism starts off by noting that the chief end of man is to "Glorify God and enjoy him forever." This capsulizes God's goal for humanity well.

Perhaps you might wonder why I chose this topic for this week's show. Well, I've just had it up to here, with all the wining and subtle accusing and judgements I've heard from other Christian brothers and sisters in just this one last week.

I asked one brother, "how is George doing?" I hadn't seen or heard from George for awhile and the brother I was with was a friend of his... He goes "Well...ho, ho, ho wait 'til I tell you this". The "well, ho, ho, ho" is a lead in that is supposed to prepare you for "bad news". "George now dresses and looks like a Hascetic Jew! He even went to Israel and wants to live there! But it's too expensive." I thought to myself, "and..." George had spent years as a Christian Pastor, although for the last several years has been inactive as a pastor. He's just been studying the word. If he wants to look like a Hascetic, well that's up to him. He pretty much is one. But apparently, this was not that which was expected of George.

Right after that I hear (from another source) "Well you know since Tom's wife died he's been seeing Doris". I replied, "What's wrong with that?" "Well, on the weekends she comes down from Pennsylvania and stays at Tom's house. He's in the ministry, he's suppose to "Abstain from all appearance of evil." "You know what people think?" (Well, I certainly know what she thought! And I guess so does everyone else to whom she can relay her message).

Then my friend Arthur, who was at a Christian banquet, was talking to Mark and asked, "Have you seen Gene's new web site?" Mark answers, "No I don't want to poison my spirit".

These are the kind of examples that are becoming the "norm" with believers and indicates that life in the Church is becoming harder to deal with then life in the World. If I mentioned that my friend George looks like a Hascetic Jew with the long hair and the brimmed black hat to someone in the world, they might reply "hey, that might be cool, I like long beards on men." If I said Doris comes down from Pennsylvania on weekends to stay with Tom, the person of the world might say, "Where's she suppose to stay at a motel at \$149 a night?" If I told someone of my friend's new web site, they'd probably say "What's the web address, next time I'm online I'll take a look at it".

"Judgement is mine sayest the Lord. Judge not lest you be judged, for as you judge so shall ye be judged". Life with Christians is becoming NO FUN. People have rightfully determined that they don't want anything to do with that kind of life...and they're right! If Jesus was back, right now, and bent down and wrote on the ground and said, "Ye who is without sin, cast the first stone", there still would be no one left there and the Lord would still say, "Where are your accusers? Neither will I accuse you. Go and sin no more." Let's keep THAT in mind. When you want to judge a brother or sister, think to yourself, "do I want Jesus to judge me?" The answer is NO. It has always been NO. "By Grace you were saved and not of works, lest man could boast." If you want to boast, boast about how good God is. If you want Grace, give Grace. Be gracious. If you want to judge something, judge how effective you have been in spreading the "Good News".