

Be Not Drunk

Ephesians 5:17-21

With Study Questions

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Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another in the fear of God (Ephesians 5:17-21).

Introduction

In 1949 George Orwell sent a copy of his book, *1984*, to his former teacher, Aldous Huxley. Huxley had earlier written his own magnum opus, *Brave New World*. Both books postulated what the future might bring (not a hopeful one). They did not entirely agree. In a private letter to Orwell, Huxley wrote:

Within the next generation I believe that the world's rulers will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging and kicking them into obedience.

Leaving the issue of state-run preschools aside for now, Huxley's prediction for how the masses would be subdued involved, what he called, "narco-hypnosis." Freud, according to Huxley, had not mastered hypnosis, but others would. And the success of herding populations like useful hypnotized chattel would involve drug usage, which he termed "narco."

To what extent has this little prognostication come true? For the first time in 100 years, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, auto accidents are not the number-one killer. Drugs are. And these fatal drugs are mainly prescription drugs: painkillers, sedatives and stimulants (primarily opiate based pain-relievers such as Vicodin, Oxycontin, Percocet, codeine, morphine, fentanyl, etc.).

At the risk of sounding conspiratorial, one can speculate that, in light of our (California's) fondness of letting criminals out of prison, funding homeless drug usage and strongly recommending state-run preschools, Huxley's letter to Orwell contained prescient wisdom. What can be easier, if you're desire to wield power, than to indoctrinate children then keep them intoxicated and dependent upon substances which you (the government) controls.

And, at further risk of being overly global and historical, consider the ironic words of Karl Marx that "Religion is the opium of the people." As it turns out, opiates are the opium of the people. Or the further irony of Mao Zedong in his comments to the Dalai Lama that "Religion is poison." Why is that ironic? Because the word in Scripture that is often translated "**sorcerer**" is *pharmakos* (from where we get our word, pharmaceutical) which can also be translated "**poisoner**." Apparently, the sorcerers addressed in Scripture (Malachi 3:5; Galatians 5:20; Revelation 21:8; 22:15) found their craft to be more effective if they used drugs to enfeeble their subjects.

Drugs and Alcohol

We opened with Ephesians 5:18, which addresses drunkenness, so you might wonder why I began by speaking of drug usage. I did this for a couple of reasons: first, alcohol is a drug so the distinction between drugs and alcohol is a bit fictitious. Second, the Bible doesn't address drug usage specifically other than alcohol. But that doesn't mean the subject is not somehow tackled in Scripture. The Bible doesn't talk about cell-phones but it would not be difficult to extrapolate what constitutes the moral or immoral use of cell-phones through Bible study.

Finally, to the point, the Bible does address intoxication (this is especially critical with the recent legalization of certain recreational drugs). And this appears to be the Apostle's point. When he writes, "**be not drunk with wine**" it would be a foolish justification for the drunk person to argue that they are not drunk with wine, they are drunk with whiskey. The admonition is against drunkenness, "**in which is dissipation**" (*asotia*). This is behavior which shows lack of concern or thought for consequences. It is being reckless or senseless. The personality is now, to a certain extent, controlled by the substance. Hence the following passage which Paul weighs against the drunkenness.

...but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:18b, 19).

More than one commentator utilized this image to compare those who get drunk and sing wanton, unbridled bar songs fueled by inebriation to those who are **“filled with the Spirit”** singing to the glory of God and the encouragement of one another in Christ.

What’s the Problem?

Drugs and alcohol, what is the problem? Perhaps we exempt ourselves from Huxley’s prognostications. I am not going to be controlled by the government. I function fine. My wits are about me. “I’ve got a handle on it” is the swan-song of many prior to homelessness, depression and death. The Scriptures speak of intoxication in fearful terms:

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise (Proverbs 20:1).

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? ³⁰ Those who linger long at the wine, Those who go in search of mixed wine. ³¹ Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it swirls around smoothly; ³² At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper. ³³ Your eyes will see strange things, And your heart will utter perverse things. ³⁴ Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, Or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying:³⁵ “They have struck me, but I was not hurt; They have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another *drink*” (Proverbs 23:29-35)?

More than once, drunkards are listed among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:21; 1 Corinthians 6:10). This is not to say that those who struggle with this sin (or any sin) will not find

forgiveness. It is to say that those who would identify themselves in a way that advocates intoxication as a legitimate approach to life, will find their very souls in danger. Why so severe?

In light of the above passage from Proverbs, we should not be fooled into thinking that there is no danger in our flirtations with these mind and body altering substances. As already pointed out, they are the number-one killer in society, having passed auto accidents, keeping in mind that more than 50 percent of fatal crashes involve an alcohol-impaired driver.

But even if it doesn't end your life, it can ruin your life. I have sadly sat across from many a fifty-year-old whose entire life has been marked by bad substance decisions he/she made somewhere between the ages of twelve and twenty. Everything else in life is done in the shadow and pull of their need/desire to be medicated.

I reached out to a dear brother who has dedicated his entire professional life to dealing with the consequences of substance abuse. One takeaway was this:

Illicit drug use ruins lives of the user and the lives of those around the user. I can't tell you how many times I've seen lives destroyed by drug use. Let young people know that addicts will likely prostitute themselves (boys and girls) and do things they could never imagine doing after addiction takes hold and when they run out of other options. When an addict is "dope sick" nothing, I mean NOTHING, else in the world will take precedence over alleviating that feeling. This happens countless times daily.

After reading this I could not help but think of the words of Christ, **"No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24)**. And his first piece of advice was "Don't give it a foothold." Some substances are highly addictive. Many addicts become addicts through prescribed pain medication. Ibuprofen may be sufficient. If not, allow yourself to be monitored.

Finally (and so much more can be said), don't believe the lies. The dealer who is about to make a sale will ignore or obfuscate the fact that according to the Center for Disease Control, 88,000 people per year die from alcohol related deaths in the United States alone. It is so severe that the CDC has declared it an official "epidemic." You will be lied to about

how excessive drinking and drugs increases aggression, lowers resistance to other temptations and contributes to academic and career failure.

You will be lied to about how harmless pot is. Where in reality it warps reality, fuels crime and violence in all the states where it became legal, burdens public health and safety (emergency rooms now littered with marijuana related incidents), hinder normal brain development (especially in those under twenty-five), negatively affects the unborn, is linked to paranoia, schizophrenia, and other mental illnesses, contributes to homelessness, is a gateway drug (teenagers who semi-regularly smoke pot are 50 times more likely to start using cocaine).

All of these facts are registered and easily found through The National Institute on Drug Abuse, The National Institute of Health, The National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, The National Coalition for the Homeless, The Institute for Behavior and Health and more. But there was one finding that piqued my interest perhaps above all the rest. It was stated regarding Marijuana use but is easily applied to all substance abuse: *Marijuana Undermines True Freedom*. In a moment we will finish by giving our attention to that thought, but first:

The Answer/Not the Answer

We've spoken a great deal about the problem but very little about the answer. And if the answer could be given in one sermon, I would package this one and take it on the road. But it is not that simple. One great difficulty is how the Scriptures do not promote or even suggest pure abstinence.

Jesus made wine (a great deal of it) at a wedding where they had already been drinking wine and ran out (John 2:1-10). Jesus Himself drank and was accused of being a **"winebibber"** (**Matthew 11:19**). He also, by His Spirit, had these actions recorded for all posterity in Scripture.

Some would, with great weakness, argue that the wine was not fermented. Not only is there no basis for this claim, other than imposing it on the text, but it hardly makes sense that Jesus would be accused of being a grape-juice bibber or that the miracle of grape-juice would have been a creation of a juice that was superior to the previously consumed wine. And if it is not fermented, how were the members of the church at Corinth getting drunk on it (1 Corinthians 11:21).

No, the Scriptures, while giving deep warnings, hold forth wine as a blessing. Wine is said to “**gladden the heart of man**” (Psalm 104:15). It is said to “**cheer(s) both God and men** (Judges 9:13), as Matthew Henry notes, for it is “used both at God’s altars and at men’s tables” (Judges 9:13). Some might think it would be just easier if the Scriptures outright condemned any use of substances altogether, but they simply don’t. Nor should they. Why would I say such a thing? Because when it gets right down to it (though some substances may be more addictive than others), the problem is not the substance.

One hundred years ago our country put on a full-court-press against the consumption of alcohol with the *Eighteenth Amendment*, otherwise known as Prohibition, with the rally cry of “*Demon Rum.*” But the demon is not in the rum. The demon (so-to-speak, though we may be talking about our sinful nature here) is in the person.

Even the natural mind has discovered, in the scores of anonymous organizations, that there lies a deeper issue for those overtaken by substances. And it is here (over arguments about what should or should not be legalized) is where the Christian must grapple. The reasons for intoxication are many. They include seeking to lessen pain, substitute for loneliness, succumbing to peer pressure, a desire to achieve an easily attained good feeling or just pure recreation. And some of these things, to a greater or lesser extent, may be relatively harmless.

We may wish to lessen the pain from a recent surgery or a bad headache. We may enjoy a glass of wine in the company of friends or seek moderate feeling of “**gladness**” after a difficult day or event. And for many people, this is of little consequence.

But here is the deeper question: at what point in your pain, your lack of contentment, your loneliness or pursuit of pleasure has your self-medication crossed the line? Crossing lines is a universal problem when it comes to sinful actions. At what point is friendly banter, flirting? At what point is exaggeration or omission of details, lying? At what point does borrowing become stealing? At what point have you lost your freedom for which Christ has set you free (Galatians 5:1)?

Christians have not been delivered from the condemnation of the law in order for us to live in subjection to sin. We are to reckon ourselves “**dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord**” (Romans 6:11). Hence the words of the Apostle:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts (Romans 6:12).

In our dabbling with substances, at what point does it become our master? It is a harsh master, bidding us to crush, not only the stranger, but the ones who love us (and we love) the most. As said, even the world understands that it can undermine true freedom. Yet apart from Christ, even those delivered merely become captives to another brutal tyrant.

But those who are the beloved in Christ know who their true Master is. He is the Master who loves, serves, dies and yet lives for His bride! And we, as His bride, are to seek Him and trust Him and find strength in Him.

There is not a one-size-fits-all answer to this epidemic. I am asking us to be brutally honest with ourselves. Jesus only asked one person to sell all he had because his love of possessions owned his soul. We, who have been rescued from death by Christ, are to live for Christ. Like a siren singing with enchanted sweetness, the substances lure us, demand our bowed knee then will seek to crush. But we need to fight.

Paul uses the images of warfare.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments (*hopla*-weapon) for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness (Romans 6:12, 13).

This thought of Paul is finished with the great promise of ultimate victory. Sin will not have dominion over us, for we are under grace. But the enemy (world, flesh and Satan) is waging attack via these substances, and we must ask, in our participation, if we are becoming his unwitting servants. If addicted, you must launch your own assault to overcome via those skilled in overcoming this type of sin. If you don't know, solicit the advice of those you love and trust. Let us beware of this sin **"crouching at the door"** (Genesis 4:7) that wishes to rule or kill. May our souls cling to Christ, whose right hand upholds us (Psalm 63:8).

Questions for Study

1. To what extent has Huxley's prediction come true (pages 2, 3)?
2. What kind of effect can illicit drug use have on society (page 3)?
3. Discuss the use of the word "sorcerer" in Scripture (page 3).
4. Does the absence of the topic of drug abuse in Scripture mean the Bible has nothing to say about it? Explain (page 3).
5. What comparison does the Apostle Paul use against being drunk with wine (pages 3, 4)?
6. What are some dangers associated with drug and alcohol abuse? How does Proverbs 23:29-35 speak to these dangers (pages 4, 5)?
7. Address the common assertion that drugs and alcohol are harmless (pages 5-7).
8. Why do you suppose the Bible doesn't just condemn alcohol? Wouldn't that solve the problem (pages 6, 7)?
9. At what point does the use of substances become an issue? How should the issue be dealt with (pages 7, 8)?