

Controlling Drunkenness and Other Bodily Urges and Addictions

Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 5:18

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The sin of drunkenness has been in this fallen world for thousands of years. It is first recorded in Scripture after the flood in the life of Noah (“And he drank of the wine, and was drunken” Genesis 9:21); though no doubt even before the flood, drunkenness was rampant (Genesis 6:5). Drunkenness was prevalent in the ancient world as it is in the modern world. In fact, drunkenness in a particular Greco-Roman cult was one aspect of worship offered to Dionysius/Bacchus—the god of wine. The Holy Spirit lists drunkenness among the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:21), which the fruit of the Holy Spirit overcomes in Galatians 5:22-23 (especially the fruit of temperance or self-control by the Holy Spirit).

Dear ones, the wall of temperance/self-control has been breached and fallen down when a Christian is overcome by drunkenness or is controlled by any other bodily urge or addiction (whether one is controlled by food, sex, riches, possessions, fashions, music, pleasure, sports, power, or people). Drunkenness is simply one example of many enemies that attack the body of the Christian and seek to tear down the wall of temperance/self-control, so that we might be overwhelmed by these enemies and serve them rather than serving Jesus Christ, our King. Thus, as we address drunkenness in the sermon this Lord’s Day, let us not be as those who gloat because we are not given to drunkenness, while at the same time we give in to other enemies that have broken through the wall of biblical self-control and have brought our bodies/senses to serve them to varying degrees.

The main points for the sermon this Lord’s Day are: (1) The Enemy Identified and Prohibited—Drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18a); (2) The Wall of Defense Established—The Filling with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b).

I. The Enemy Identified and Prohibited—Drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18a).

A. The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians was written while Paul was in a Roman prison (likely 60-61 a.d.).

1. Ephesus was the capital of the Roman Province of Asia Minor, and was a city in which Paul had spent significant time in planting the church there. He had warned the Elders of Ephesus that after his departure, there would arise from in their midst false teachers who would bring their false doctrine and corrupt practice into the church.

2. The first three chapters of Ephesians is of a more doctrinal nature, focusing on the sovereignty of God in salvation, on the foundation of Christ to this new spiritual temple that is being formed, which temple (the Church of Christ) makes no distinction in its membership between male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. Then in the last three chapters (4-6) of Ephesians, Paul focuses more of his attention on practical subjects in applying the doctrine he had just taught. Dear ones, doctrine is never intended by the Holy Spirit to be merely lodged in the mind, but is always to be applied and practiced in our lives (something is spiritually wrong where there is a significant disconnect between what we believe and what we practice).

3. As we turn our attention to Ephesians 5, Paul addresses our love-bound duty to avoid the wicked practices of the surrounding pagan and worldly culture, and to completely break away from the vices in which even they themselves had once indulged before their conversion to Christ. The Apostle Paul particularly cautions them against drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18), and the wicked, self-destructive behavior that accompanied this sin; and he exhorts them to withstand by the power of the Holy Spirit such bodily attacks from the promiscuous culture in which they lived (which is very much like the promiscuous culture in

which we now live).

B. As we now consider our text in Ephesians 5:18, let us first understand the prohibition that is given: “And be not drunk with wine.” It is the present tense in Greek that is used in this command and it is used with the negative (“not”). This is important to note, for by this construction Paul is actually prohibiting activity (namely, drunkenness) that is presently going on within the Church of Ephesus. Paul is not so much prohibiting an activity that has not begun in the Church, but is rather prohibiting an activity that has begun (to some degree) within the Church (“Stop being drunk with wine”). This implies that there were those in the Ephesian Church that were giving themselves to drunkenness (perhaps from the cultural/religious practices of Ephesus, or perhaps from false teachers in their midst). This is not a potential problem within the Church of Ephesus, but an actual problem that presently needed to be addressed. Just as there is no Christian that is beyond reformation and sanctification, there is no Church (not even an Apostolic Church) that is beyond reformation and sanctification. We ought to unite with that Church that has the most faithful Terms of Communion, but even such a Church has so much room for growth and sanctification (there is never a place to boast in pride).

C. As we consider this prohibition against drunkenness, let us first consider what drunkenness IS NOT, and then we will consider what drunkenness IS.

1. **What Drunkenness Is NOT.**

a. Drunkenness IS NOT drinking wine (or other fermented beverages) in moderation.

(1) The Scripture does not condemn the use of alcoholic beverages, it condemns the abuse of alcoholic beverages (i.e. drunkenness—Ephesians 5:18). Fermented beverages are not sinful in themselves, but are part of that which God has made for man’s enjoyment (Psalm 104:14-15). This is the same word for “wine” (*yayin* in the Hebrew text) that was able to make Noah drunk when abused (Genesis 9:21) and is one of the delicacies that Divine Wisdom prepares for all who seek her (Proverbs 9:5). Even “new wine” is fermented and able to make one drunk when it is abused (Acts 2:13-15). Note also that the use of wine in Scripture was not limited to the privacy of one’s home, but was even used for public occasions as well. The wine (*oinos* in the Greek text) that Jesus made from water for a social occasion (namely, a wedding) in John 2:9 is the same wine (*oinos*) that was able to make one drunk when abused (Ephesians 5:18).

(2) There is a word in the Hebrew language that means “grape juice” (*mishrah*). The only time it is used in the Old Testament is in Numbers 6:3 where the Nazarite is not only forbidden from drinking wine (*yayin*) and strong drink (*shekar*), but is also prohibited from drinking grape juice (*mishrah*) and from eating grapes or raisins as well. If the Bible teaches that we should avoid the use of all fermented beverages (as many have argued), why not simply use the word for the juice of grapes (*mishrah* in Hebrew or *trux* in Greek) instead of words that refer to fermented beverages (*yayin* and *oinos*)?

(3) Because something God gives to man for his good may be abused is no reason to forbid the moderate and lawful use of that gift (whether money, cars, food, sex, authority). However, it must also be said that just because wine (or fermented beverages) may be lawfully used in moderation (in private or in public) does not mean that all are obligated to use it in a private or social context (some may not like the taste or some may choose to avoid personal use because of its abuse in the lives of others or in their own lives).

(4) The general principles of glorifying God even in what we drink (1 Corinthians 10:31) and of loving the brethren should always guide us in what we may have a right to enjoy (Romans 14:19,21). In spite of the prevailing culture of drunkenness in which Paul and early Christians lived, Paul does not forbid drinking wine (or other fermented beverages), but rather forbids drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18).

b. Drunkenness IS NOT using alcoholic beverages for medicinal reasons (1 Timothy 5:23). In fact, I have numerous reports in my files of medical studies done in which the moderate use of red wine (in particular) is cited as being of benefit in reducing the risk of arthritis, cancer, heart disease, stroke, digestive problems, and diabetes. When used in moderation (under the control of the Holy Spirit), wine is of benefit to the body as the Holy Spirit teaches through Paul.

2. **What Drunkenness IS.**

a. Drunkenness is a sin and is condemned in Scripture (Isaiah 5:11; Ephesians 5:18).

b. Drunkenness in the Bible is not defined by way of the percentage of blood alcohol concentration (which States now use to determine whether one is intoxicated while driving), but is rather illustrated by various forms of uncontrolled behavior: Psalm 107:27; Proverbs 23:29; Isaiah 19:14; Lamentations 4:21; Revelation 17:2. The self-destructive nature of this sin is evident in the words, “And be not drunk with wine, **wherein is excess.**” The word translated “excess” basically means “without health”, and it comes to refer to one who by his drunkenness is destroying himself (spiritually, bodily, financially, familiarly, and reputationally). All bodily addictions are in some sense self-destructive (whether one is consumed with food, riches, possessions, sex, or the body).

c. Drunkenness is a sin because it controls us and we are not to be under the control of anyone or anything except the Holy Spirit. Christians are to have only one master—Jesus Christ. Thus, **when food controls us** (whether eating beyond measure or starving ourselves to look like a model), **when sex controls us** (whether by means of what we watch, whether by means of what we listen to, or whether by means of fornication/sexual immorality), **when riches control us** (so that we covet what we do not have, and fear losing what we do have), **when our body controls us** (by way of making it an idol we serve and flaunt before others and must clothe with the most recent fads and fashions in order to fit in), then we are sinning by being under the control of someone or something other than God, the Holy Spirit (Isaiah 29:9—they were drunk with their own self-indulgence with themselves and with the things of this world). That is what characterizes drunkenness, and it is what characterizes all manner of sin that breaks through the wall of self-control. Jesus Christ is Lord, and He is Lord over both our body and our spirit (1 Corinthians 6:20). The best of Christians need to be cautioned against the worst of sins. No previous consistency of walk ought to give us a false security that our wall of self-control cannot be breached, especially if we take little or no care to examine that wall and fortify it by being daily filled with the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 10:12).

C. Why do people become drunk with wine or with other fermented beverages?

1. To party and to have a good time. “Let’s enjoy ourselves. It’s a day of celebration—a wedding, a birthday, a weekend.”

2. To give one a sense of boldness in facing a very difficult person or situation.

3. To drown pain, sorrow, or heartache that seems too much to bear.

4. To let down inhibitions so that one can enjoy being around others.

5. To be fashionable and to fit in with the crowd—after all, everyone is doing it.

6. Dear ones, drunkenness is not God’s answer for any excuse one may offer (whether one is flying high or falling into the depths of despair). Drunkenness will not be of help in overcoming a problem in our life, it will only make it worse. And drunkenness (or other bodily addictions) will not be the only sin that breaks through the wall of biblical self-control, but many other sins will accompany it (whether rage, lust and immorality, loss of family, loss of job, and most importantly loss of communion with Christ and God’s discipline by way of the consequences we may suffer). The answer, as we shall see, is not to be controlled by your appetites, by wine, or by anyone or anything else, but to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. Joy, peace, comfort, courage, and all that we need is found in Christ and is supplied by the Holy Spirit.

II. **The Wall of Defense Established—The Filling with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b).**

A. Here we see the contrast that will fortify the wall of temperance/self-control against the attack of drunkenness (and other bodily addictions): “But be filled with the Holy Spirit”. This command is in the present tense as well: “Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit.” This is to be a daily filling. What characterizes the Christian is not being under the control of wine or self, or anyone or anything else, but being under the control of the Holy Spirit. This is the fruit of the Spirit that Christ has given to us in order to keep the enemies within and without from breaking through and overwhelming us—this fruit of the Spirit is our wall of defense. And when it falls because we have not inspected it, because we have not fortified it, because we have not learned from past breaches what steps to prevent it from being breached again and again, then we will make ourselves vulnerable to all manner of attack from enemies against our body and heart.

B. In Galatians 5:23, the King James Version uses the word “temperance” for this fruit of the Spirit. Other English Versions use the word, “self-control”. Both of these words are subject to some misunderstanding and therefore require some clarification.

1. Temperance actually means moderation and not total abstinence, but as a result of the Temperance Movement back in the 19th century, the word became associated with total abstinence from all fermented beverages. The Temperance Movement led to enacting the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (in 1920) which prohibited the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, into, or out of the United States and all its territories. It was repealed in 1933. Therefore, it should be noted that the biblical fruit of “temperance” when applied to the use of fermented beverages does not mean total abstinence, but rather means the Spirit-controlled moderation in the use of fermented beverages.

2. I would also note in regard to the term “self-control” that we must make some clarification about it as well. This fruit of the Spirit is not a natural self-determination, self-restraint, or self-resolve, reaching deep inside the natural man to resist certain temptations, but is rather the supernatural fruit of submitting our body and our heart under the control of the Holy Spirit—the self is not in control, but is rather under the control of the Holy Spirit.

C. What is it to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

1. It is not only to have God’s Spirit within your life, but it is to desire more of the Spirit (or better to yield more of yourself to the Spirit) and to fervently pray for the Spirit of God to work in you, to use you, to glorify Christ in you, to bear His fruit in you, to control your decisions, your affections, your plans, your work, your possessions, your family, so that He controls you more than wine (or any other bodily urge or addiction) controls you.

2. From the immediate context, to be filled with the Spirit would seem to involve a number of steps in the life of a Christian: to have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11); to walk as wise not as fools (Ephesians 5:15); to redeem the time (Ephesians 5:16); to be growing in knowledge of God’s revealed will and doing it (Ephesians 5:17); to worship in spirit and in truth (Ephesians 5:19-20); and to submit in the Lord to one another (Ephesians 5:21).

3. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, dear ones, is surrendering all to the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we grow in giving ourselves, and everyone and everything to the control of the Holy Spirit. For the more we surrender and give to Him, the more He fills us with Himself. It is less of me, that there might be more of Thee, O Blessed Spirit. It is emptying myself of what pleases me that I might be filled with what pleases Thee, O Lord. It is crucifying me to the world and the world to me that more of Christ might live in me. I so much appreciate these closing thoughts found in the *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Letter CCXXIII: p.435):

Let pleasures be crucified, and riches be crucified, and court and honour be crucified. And since the apostle saith that the world is crucified to him, we may put this world to the hanged man’s

doom, and to the gallows: and who will give much for a hanged man? As little should we give for a hanged and crucified world. Yet, what a sweet smell hath this dead carrion [flesh—GLP] to many fools in the world! . . . Fools are pulling it off the gallows, and contending for it. Oh, when will we learn to be mortified men, and to have our fill of those things that have but their short summer quarter of this life! If we saw our Father's house, and that great and fair city, the New Jerusalem, which is up above the sun and moon, we would cry to be over the water, and to be carried in Christ's arms out of this borrowed prison.

Dear ones, to have more of the Spirit is to give up more of yourself to the Holy Spirit. To be growing in the fruit of self-control is to be growing in being controlled by the Holy Spirit of God. The wall of temperance and self-control will only stand against bodily urges and addictions if you are daily being filled with the Holy Spirit.

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). Amen.

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