

Sermon Summary #10

The Virtue of Self-Control and the Vice of Intoxication Galatians 5:13

I want to begin by identifying three issues that are **not** up for discussion this morning. That doesn't mean they aren't important or that they shouldn't be addressed at some point. It's simply that we need to keep our focus limited and precise and time will not allow me to answer every question that may arise.

Those three issues on which I will say very little are these. **First**, I will not address the debate over whether or not the word translated "wine" in the OT and NT refers to an intoxicating beverage or grape juice. Numerous books have been written on behalf of both sides of this argument. Some Christians are persuaded that "wine" in the Bible is non-alcoholic or at least so thoroughly diluted that it has no intoxicating effects on those who drink it. They would put biblical "wine" in a class with Welch's grape juice or something similar. Others are equally persuaded that "wine" is alcoholic and potentially intoxicating. I would agree with this second view. You are certainly free to believe the first view. You should never feel judged or condemned or marginalized for believing that "wine" in Scripture is non-alcoholic. I think you are wrong in that view, but you are not in sin for believing it. My point is simply that we aren't going to enter into that debate this morning.

The **second** issue we will not address is the related question of whether or not the Bible requires total abstinence. In other words, on the assumption that "wine" in Scripture is potentially intoxicating, does the Word of God prohibit Christians from drinking it entirely? Again, you are certainly free to embrace that interpretation. *You are certainly free to practice total abstinence. But I do not believe the Bible requires that we totally abstain.* It **does** require that we not get drunk. My conviction is that the word "wine" refers to a potentially intoxicating beverage and that the Bible requires moderation in its use. It does not, however, require total abstinence. But that is not an issue that we will address today.

Third, I will not address the question of whether or not marijuana should be made legal and available for use in cases of *extreme medical distress*. But I will give you my opinion! My humble opinion is that a good case can be made for allowing marijuana use in certain instances. I don't know the criteria one would employ to make the determination as to when marijuana should be used and when not. But it seems reasonable to me, and not at all unbiblical, that if marijuana can be used in some form and under the oversight of a physician to help those in extreme pain or those for whom all other medical remedies have proven ineffective, it should be allowed. I know there are arguments against the medical use of marijuana, but I cannot interact with them today.

Here is what is important for you to remember as we proceed. These three issues on which I will say no more are matters that fall under the umbrella of *Christian freedom*. And I strongly urge all of us at Bridgeway not to make them matters of law and thus judge one another as if someone who disagrees with us on any of them is in sin.

There may be some here today who think that I am *unqualified* to address this matter, given the fact that I've never been drunk and I have never smoked marijuana, nor have I ever used an illegal drug. "Sam, how do you propose to speak with any authority on such matters when you have no idea what it feels like to be intoxicated or high?" My answer is this: I may well be unqualified to tell you what it *feels* like to be intoxicated or high, but I am fully qualified to tell you *what the Bible says* about the experience of becoming intoxicated or high!

So, what then is the issue before us? The question is two-fold. First, what does the book of Proverbs say about drunkenness, about intoxication through alcoholic beverages? Second, is there an analogy between the intoxicating effects of alcohol and the intoxicating effects of recreational use of marijuana? Let's begin with the first.

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

The words “strong drink” probably refer to fermented drink from either grain or fruit. “There is no evidence that distilled liquors were known this early in history” (Kitchen, 437). Here wine and strong drink are personified as individuals who mock and brawl. The point is that drinking to excess brings about arrogant and violent behavior in the one who comes under their influence. In Proverbs, when it says you are “not wise,” it means you are a fool. You may be cool, but you are also a fool. And the last time I checked in Proverbs, there’s nothing cool about being a fool. Simply put, getting drunk is the action of a fool. So don’t do it!

(2) “Hear, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat, for the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them with rags” (Prov. 23:19-21).

The essence of wisdom consists in the ability to think straight, to think clearly about the issues of life, and to make prudent decisions when confronted with various challenges. Both drinking and eating to excess are a reflection of the lack of self-control and self-discipline. They will invariably impair your ability to walk “in the way” of God and if not checked will eventually lead to poverty.

The relation between v. 19 and vv. 20-21 must be noted. His counsel is neither to drink to excess nor associate with those who do. Drunkenness is destructive of any hope for progress or success in life. It is wholly contrary to the way of wisdom outlined in this book.

There is a fascinating parallel to this text in Deuteronomy 21:20. There a mother and father are compelled to bring their rebellious child to the elders of the city. The text says, “and they shall say to the elders of the city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; **he is a glutton and a drunkard.**’” Evidently eating to excess and drinking to excess are in a sense symbolic of the failure to exercise self-control. The fundamental underlying problem of the glutton and the drunk is that he/she does not understand moderation; there is little to any mental, physical, or spiritual discipline. Such people are characterized by mindless excess and self-indulgence.

(3) “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. ‘They struck me,’ you will say, ‘but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink!’” (Prov. 23:29-35).

Note the reasons why drinking to excess is of such great concern. The consequences are devastating.

- This person has woe, sorrow, strife, complaining.
- They suffer “wounds without cause.” This may mean that as a result of being intoxicated they expose themselves to situations where they are likely to suffer injuries without having anything to deserve them. Or it may mean the drunkard lives under the delusion that he has been treated unfairly when in fact he hasn’t. Or perhaps it simply points to the physical consequences of falling down drunk or running into objects or perhaps suffering at the hands of others whom you’ve provoked in your drunken stupor.
- They suffer from red and bleary-eyes.
- Drunkenness also leads to hallucinations and seeing strange things.
- It leads to perverse and profane speech; you say things when drunk that you wouldn’t dare say when sober. Simply put, drinking to excess distorts both vision and speech.
- And you are oblivious to life around you, not knowing where you are or what has happened that led you into the mess you’re in. The point of v. 34 is disputed, as several interpretations have been suggested. Some say that the drunkard is oblivious to the many threats around him. He lies down to sleep thinking it to be a bed only to realize that it is the sea and he may well sink and drown. Or he thinks he’s safe, never realizing until it’s too late that he’s fallen asleep on a mast and is almost certain to fall and be killed.
- And you find yourself in the position where you think, “The only way past this confusion is yet another drink!” When a drunk wakes up his one desire is to throw off the effects of his last binge so he can start another!

The phrase in v. 30, “those who tarry long over wine,” sounds very much like what I so often in the corporate world: “Hey, let’s discuss business over a drink!” And then an hour turns to two and then three and one loses all count of how much alcohol has been consumed. The same word is used in Isaiah 5:11 to describe those who “tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them.” Wine is aesthetically pleasing. It sparkles and goes down smoothly. But don’t be hypnotized by the glamour of it all. Be judicious. Be careful. Guard your heart and your mouth. In his commentary on Proverbs, John Kitchen says this:

“These phrases describe those smitten by and addicted to, not merely the physiological grip of alcohol, but also the aesthetic experience of drinking. They have become champions of drinking. They are not merely those who can ‘hold their drink,’ but are connoisseurs of alcohol and its consumption. This is about more than thirst and drunkenness; this has become an art to them” (John Kitchen, 535).

Now, is it possible to enjoy the aesthetic pleasures of wine and to savor its taste and bouquet without yielding to the allure of its intoxicating powers? Yes. But be very careful. The danger of alcohol is that you rarely will notice when you’ve crossed the line.

(4) “The words of King Lemuel. An oracle that his mother taught him: What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb? What are you doing, son of my vows? Do not give your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more. Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:1-9).

Although this warning is directed specifically to the king, it applies equally to all. The king more so than everyone else must keep his wits about him. ***Authority brings responsibility.*** He must remain sharp and informed and clear-headed in order to make just decisions and to lead well. But the principle is applicable to everyone. The point is simply this: ***Don’t do anything that impairs your judgment. Don’t do anything that undermines your ability to think and speak and lead. Don’t do anything that diminishes your capacity to respond quickly and accurately, both mentally and physically.***

But what about vv. 6-7? Most believe that these statements are ***sarcastic***. Kings have no reason to come under the intoxicating influence of alcohol, but those in distress and the dying may have grounds for wanting it. If someone insists on drinking to excess, let it be those who are suffering greatly. Again, though, the author is saying that in a sarcastic tone of voice. ***It’s not advice!*** If anything, as vv. 8-9 make clear, the king should help the poor and hurting, not add to their problems by giving them something to drink.

We now turn to our second question regarding ***the recreational use of marijuana.***

As most of you know, this past November the citizens of Colorado approved Amendment 64 that allows “the personal use and regulation of marijuana” for adults 21 years and older. Although marijuana is still illegal under federal law, its legal sale commenced on January 1, 2014, in Colorado. This has led to countless discussions and debates among Christians as to whether the use of marijuana is a sin. Again, I’m not talking about its use in cases of extreme medical emergencies where it can be shown that marijuana under the direction of a physician can be beneficial in the healing process. We are talking about the recreational use of marijuana when ***the primary intent is to get “high” or “stoned.”***

Does the Bible address the use of marijuana? Yes and No! Some believe it is explicitly endorsed in Genesis 1:29 where God said to Adam: “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.”

But how many people ingest marijuana as **food**? This passage gives no support for the practice of smoking marijuana for a recreational high. I know of no food that we consume by smoking. As Joe Carter has written, “Presumably, no one adds marijuana to brownies because it improves their flavor. The reason to add this particular plant to foodstuffs is because of its effect on senses other than taste” (“Is Recreational Marijuana Use a Sin,” January 6, 2014, The Gospel Coalition Blog).

So, aside from this passage in Genesis marijuana is nowhere mentioned in Scripture. The question we then need to ask and answer is this: *Do we find in the Bible something that is analogous to the recreational use of marijuana? The answer is Yes: intoxication by drinking alcohol.*

But what constitutes “intoxication”? If the Bible permits the use of alcohol in moderation, might it not also permit the use of marijuana in moderation? We know that a person can consume small quantities of alcohol without any intention of getting drunk. Can a person similarly consume small quantities of marijuana without any intention of becoming intoxicated? To answer that we must define “intoxication”.

Joe Carter is helpful here. He explains that “for alcohol, the unit of measure is the ‘standard drink,’ that is any drink that contains about 14 grams of pure alcohol (about 0.6 fluid ounces or 1.2 tablespoons). A standard drink is conventionally defined as the alcohol content of 12 ounces of 5 percent-alcohol beer or 5 ounces of 12 percent-alcohol wine or an ounce and half (a shot) of 40 percent-alcohol (80-proof) spirits (hard liquor). In most U.S. states, the legally defined level of intoxication typically occurs, depending on pacing, after four drinks for an average-sized woman or five for an average-sized man.”

But it takes only four puffs of a marijuana cigarette to induce a state of intoxication. If your intent for ingesting marijuana in any form isn’t for the intoxicating effect, why do you bother? What benefits from it are you seeking? And if your intent in the recreational use of marijuana is indeed some level of intoxication, your action is sinful.

But what about *caffeine*? People drink coffee and coca-cola and certain energy drinks to achieve a physical effect. That’s true, but there’s a significant difference. As John Piper has pointed out, “Marijuana temporarily impairs the reliable processing of surrounding reality. Caffeine ordinarily sharpens that processing. Most coffee drinkers hope to stay awake, do their jobs more reliably, and drive more safely. It is certainly possible to abuse caffeine, but, as a natural stimulant, it is most commonly used not as an escape from reality, but as an effort to interact responsibly with reality.” Thus, “unlike caffeine, marijuana is not generally thought of as an empowering drug that enables you to be a more alert dad, or a more aware mother, or a more competent employee. Rather, for most users, it is a recreational escape, which produces diminished accuracy of observation, memory, and reasoning. And it may have lasting negative effects on the mind’s ability to do what God created it to do” (“Don’t Let Your Mind go to Pot,” January 9, 2014, www.desiringgod.org).

In light of this, I would argue that several things justify the conclusion that the recreational use of marijuana with the intent to get “high” is sinful, even if it were to occur in a state where it is technically legal.

First, we read in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 – “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” Contrary to what non-Christians think about themselves, you, Christian man and Christian woman, *you do not have ultimate authority over your body to do with it what you please. Your body belongs to Christ! Your body is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit! Your body is to be used to honor and glorify God!*

So, if you should choose to drink to excess or smoke marijuana for a high you need to ask: “Does this decision make Jesus look good?” We should also ask this about the quality of TV shows we watch, or what we see on the Internet, or the kind of music we listen to, or the rating of movies we attend, or how much we eat.

Second, we read in 1 Corinthians 6:13 that the body is meant “for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” Our bodies are designed by creation and redeemed by the blood of Christ so that they might be instruments for his use and his glory. Therefore, we must strive not to dull or diminish or weaken our God-given physical and mental capacities to glorify and serve God. We must strive to see clearly and think clearly and decide clearly and speak clearly and remember clearly. Our minds are designed by God to know him and love him and grow in our affections for him. We should avoid anything that undermines our minds in this regard. As Piper put it, “*be ruthlessly clear-headed.*”

Third, what sort of witness for Jesus do we give when we join with the world in the recreational use of a drug whose purpose is to induce a state of passivity and stupor and diminished accuracy in mental observation and memory and basic reasoning powers? Not a good one, in my opinion.

Fourth, in cases such as this I often think we are asking the wrong question. We ask: "What's wrong with it?" "Why shouldn't I?" "How far can I go and still not sin?" Perhaps we should ask: "Will it promote the cause of Christ?" "Will this activity lead me and others to treasure Jesus above all else?" "Will it help me fight the fight of faith with greater success?" "Will it sharpen and intensify my knowledge of Christ and my commitment to glorify him in all things?" Asking those questions may well elicit a different answer from the one we typically hear.

Some Conclusions about the use of Alcohol in Moderation

If the Bible permits the use of alcohol in moderation, but *never* for intoxication, what guidelines are there for us? Perhaps the best place to look for help and guidance when it comes to the issue of alcohol is Romans 14. There Paul talks about two kinds of Christians. He calls them the "**weak**" brother and the "**strong**" brother (or sister!).

The weak brother is the one who entertains scruples on secondary matters. He has misgivings about the moral and spiritual propriety of such practices. The weak brother or sister is the one who has not sufficiently understood the truth of ***1 Tim. 4:4-5; 1 Cor. 10:25-26; Rom. 14:14a.*** *Weakness in faith*, therefore, is **not** a failure to believe the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. It is, rather, a failure to understand the implications of such doctrine in the area of practical freedom. They had failed to grasp the truth of 1 Cor. 8:8 - "*Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do*" (cf. Mark 7:14-15).

Evidently the "weak" lived in fear that by partaking of certain foods and drink or participating in certain practices they would be *spiritually infected* in some way. They believed that partaking would weaken them in their walk and perhaps expose them to even greater evils. They also believed that there was spiritual value or moral virtue in *abstinence per se*: to deny oneself is inherently good and to indulge oneself is inherently bad. Finally, they basically ***spiritually timid*** people who could be easily pressured to yield to social pressure, succumbing to contempt and ridicule and falling in with the practices of their fellow-Christians, in spite of their scruples and misgivings.

Many have misunderstood *weakness* to be synonymous with *excess*. The weak brother, so some have thought, is the one who can't restrain himself and is given to over-indulgence in such matters as eating and drinking. The *strong* are those who have the will-power to abstain and should be careful not to place before their weaker brethren an inducement to indulge their vices. NO.

"The weak of Romans 14," explains John Murray, "are not those given to excess. They are the opposite; they are total abstainers from certain articles of food [and drink]. The *weak* addicted to excess do not abstain; they take too much" (260). Those who have a "weakness" that leads to excess or over-indulgence are dealt with in completely other terms. Paul refers to such behavior as *sin*. Drunkards, for example, certainly have a weakness. But it is the sort of weakness that Paul condemns (1 Cor. 6:10). But here in Romans 14 he tells us to "welcome" the one who is weak (v. 1). ***Weakness in Romans 14 is not intemperate overindulgence but overly scrupulous abstinence.*** We must remember that ***abstinence per se is not weakness.*** The decisive factor is one's *motive* for abstention. To abstain for non-religious reasons does **NOT** make one *weak*.

People may choose to be teetotalers for a number of perfectly legitimate reasons. I have a good friend who by his own confession says he has an addictive personality and once he starts something he has a difficult time stopping. Moderation is not a word that applies well to him in any arena of life, so he chooses never to start drinking at all. Now, that is true wisdom!

Others choose not to drink to set a good example in a society where the destructive effects of alcohol are so much in evidence. My father was not a teetotaler in principle but chose never to keep alcohol in the house or to use it while my sister and I were still living there. To him, it simply wasn't worth the risk of setting an example for us that might eventually lead to sinful behavior.

Others don't drink at all because they believe they can fulfill their responsibilities and obligations in life and work more effectively if they abstain. They value keeping a clear head above whatever benefits wine or beer might bring to them.

There is one reason for being a teetotaler that is entirely illegitimate and unbiblical. That is if you abstain because you think God will love you more if you do. You mistakenly believe that abstinence per se is more godly or

righteous or more spiritual than participation. God does not love more or less the teetotaler than he does those who drink in moderation. God also loves those who drink to excess, but they will suffer loss of joy and communion and fellowship with the Savior because of their overindulgence.

What, then, constitutes *strength*? The strong, quite simply, are those who correctly perceive the truth of 1 Tim. 4:4-5 and Rom. 14:14a. Paul was strong (cf. 15:1). The strong are those who, by reason of their knowledge of God and grace, enjoy the full range of Christian liberty without being condemned in their conscience.

Paul's counsel is simple and straight to the point. **To the strong**, he says: "Don't reject the weak or hold them at arm's length. Welcome them as much as you would someone who shares your own convictions on this matter. Don't despise or disregard them. Love them. And if you should discover that your exercise of Christian freedom when it comes to something like drinking may well push the weak believer across the line of his own conscience, then don't drink. Don't let your exercise of legitimate freedom become the cause for a weaker brother/sister stumbling in their faith.

To the weak, Paul says: "Don't pass judgment on the strong. Don't frown with disapproval when the strong enjoys his freedom on matters where you hold a different opinion."

But know this for sure: Paul's most urgent counsel is for the strong Christian. In a word, he says: Don't exercise your liberty in such a way that you lead or influence a weaker brother to violate his conscience. This happens when the weaker brother, under pressure from how you live, participates in something that in his conscience he thinks is wrong. It **isn't** wrong. But he **thinks** it is. So, to the stronger Christian Paul says: Be willing to forego the exercise of your liberty out of love for your weaker brother or sister.

Concluding Principles

1) If someone says to me: "Your drinking of wine/beer is sin," should I cease? To answer the question we must first determine if the one who protests is a *weaker* brother. As we have seen, by *weaker* brother Paul is thinking of someone who not only has a misconception of what is inherently right and wrong, clean and unclean, but is actually himself induced or led to perform the action in question because of *your* participation. Paul is thinking of someone who is led to violate his own conscience because he is either untaught or excessively timid and fearful. ***His concern over your reaction to his abstinence leads him to do what his conscience forbids.*** This must be emphasized, because the person who protests your expression of liberty may be a *legalist*. Legalists are in no danger of violating their conscience! They are not in the least tempted to engage in the activity in question. Their aim is not simply to refrain from a specified activity, but to persuade you to refrain as well, often through intimidation, shame, guilt, etc. ***The weaker brother is NOT a legalist! And the legalist is NOT a weaker brother!***

2) If you do choose to forego the exercise of your liberty for the sake of a weaker brother, be certain to point out that you are **not** doing so because **you** think it is sin, but because **he** thinks it is sin. If you do not, you will only confirm him in his weakness.

3) Christian liberty may legitimately manifest itself in abstinence or asceticism. Christian liberty includes the right to abstain from otherwise legitimate pursuits if one is convinced in his/her own mind that such is the will of God *for them personally*. In other words, you may fully believe in the truth of Rom. 14:14a, yet choose to abstain anyway. Christian liberty does **not** include the right to insist that others likewise abstain simply because **you** do. Far less does it include the right to judge them as sub-spiritual for choosing a different course of action from you.

4) ***Do not become enslaved to your own liberty!*** Some believe that simply because they are free in regard to such matters as drinking and eating that they **must** always exercise that liberty. It would be wrong of them not to enjoy their liberty. No. There is something more important than liberty. It's called love.

In conclusion, let us remember that the only external power to which you should yield conscious control or under whose influence you should come, is the Holy Spirit of God! "And do not get drunk with wine [or high on marijuana], for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).