

## Proverbs 23:19-21 Giving up Drinking or smoking

The vicar, out late one night visiting saw one of his parishioners staggering out of a bar clearly the worse for wear; “Drunk again?!” he reprimanded the man.

“Yeah, me too, vicar!” Admitted the parishioner.

Well, misunderstandings aside it’s still been a bad week for the Church and Alcohol, in the news it was reported that Strathclyde Police Force – the largest in Scotland, had discovered that Buckfast Tonic Wine (brewed by the Benedictine monks at Buckfast Abbey in Devon) has been mentioned in 5,000 crime reports and that the Buckfast tonic wine bottle itself has been used as a weapon 114 times.

Police said the figures suggested there is a definite association between Buckfast and violence – I’m assuming they mean the Tonic wine rather than the Abbey! But the point is clear, alcohol can be a problem, hence the government and opposition parties all putting forward proposals this week to curb Britain’s Binge drinking culture.

Well, Perhaps all this seems a little far removed to the respectable worshippers in church this morning, but if the polls on New Years Resolutions are to be believed, then giving up smoking, or drinking or something else is pretty high on the list - a lot of people use January to detox and at least cut back on their excesses, even if only one visitor to our website is owning up to it in our poll! So let’s see what Proverbs has to say.

First of all, God is not a party pooper, God does not forbid alcohol, indeed proverbs uses some positive images of alcohol, in chapter 3 verse 9 we read about the benefits of giving sacrificially to God, “Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”

The inference there is clearly that having vats brimming over with new wine is a good thing.

Then again, wisdom herself, who, as we have seen, is highly prized, is described as preparing a feast of good things for those who will come to her; “[Wisdom] has prepared her meat and mixed her wine; she has also set her table. She has sent out her maids, and she calls from the highest point of the city. “Let all who are simple come in here!” she says to those who lack judgment. “Come, eat my food and drink the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways and you will live; walk in the way of understanding.”

And we know that Jesus himself shared wine with his friends and instructed us to do the same in memory of his blood poured out for us on the cross. He spoke of the kingdom of God breaking into the world through him as being like new wine and he famously demonstrated it at a wedding, not to mention Paul instructing Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach problems.

So wine, per se is not a bad thing, but as Paul said to the Corinthians albeit in a different context, “Everything is permissible for me— but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me— but I will not be mastered by anything.”

You see, although you might not have a problem with alcohol, the book of proverbs shows us the dangers of compulsive or addictive behaviour in any area of our lives but it does so through the example of wine. So, let’s take a closer look at those dangers.

## **Violence**

We all know that alcohol causes behavioural problems, it’s estimated that the annual cost of drink-related crime and disorder in the UK is somewhere between £8bn and £13bn

and in chapter 20:1 of proverbs we read “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.”

So, can you see the difference here already? The wife of noble character – the personification of wisdom whom we encountered last week considered a field, bought it and out of her earning planted a vineyard. Because she has submitted to wisdom – God’s wisdom, she is in control. In the Old Testament agricultural world wine was an everyday commodity, a good investment for the wise farmer who controlled its production and consumption, but the person who is not wise has allowed alcohol to lead him (or her) astray – the servant has become the master.

And as the wine takes control, the individual looses control; control over their tongue – they become a mocker and we still say of someone, “Oh, it’s just the beer talking” - they lose control over their reactions, so because their mouth isn’t working properly they do their “talking with their fists” – they turn into a brawler. And such is the scene in towns and cities throughout our country every weekend.

Now, maybe you don’t have a problem with alcohol, but have you allowed something else unwise and ungodly to master you? Is there something that changes you? Do you treat people in a Christ-like manner when you are under its influence? It could be something as innocent as a mobile phone, a society or perhaps when you get behind the wheel of a car. Is there something in your life which, when you really analyse it, leads you into a way of living which is dishonouring to God, something which you need to learn to master with Godly wisdom?

Second, there is the impact on our **Finances**.

In proverbs 23:19-21 we hear this; “Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat,

for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags.”

I believe the cost of a packet of cigarettes is about £5 for 20, so if you smoked a packet a day that would be £155 a month – nearly £2000 a year, that’s a holiday (or two), several month’s weekly shops? It will also buy enough hygiene kits for 200 families in Haiti or provide 1600 people with basic toilet facilities. Being a glutton with any addiction; alcohol, food, cigarettes or whatever has a financial cost, the money devoured by it could well be used to provide for your family, or to give generously to those in need.

Look again at the wife of noble character, she works hard for her family and uses her money wisely caring for them, “When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.” Meaning they are clothed in the best or the warmest material. And it is not only her family that she cares for, she also uses her money wisely to care for those in need, “She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.”

And of course there is often the financial cost to others of our addictions; the estimated cost in 2008 to the NHS of smoking was 2.7 billion pounds, that’s a billion pounds more than a decade earlier! OK, it’s only a fraction of our national debt – a symptom itself of our addiction to a very greedy lifestyle, but think of what the NHS could have spent that money on if it wasn’t being used for smokers and then add on the cost of alcohol abuse – a further £3 billion a year and then keep going with the cost of obesity etc.

No wonder we read in Proverbs 21:17, “He who loves pleasure will become poor; whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.” It is indeed a message for us individually and as a nation.

Well, lastly Proverbs tells us that our addictions reduce our capacity to act with **Responsibility**.

In chapter 31 we read, “It is not for kings, O Lemuel— not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights. Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”

On the cross Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23) to deaden his pain, yet he refused to die for the sins of the world with a clouded mind and dulled senses, but this is the only use the writer of this proverb can see for wine – it distracts you from misery and anesthetises your brain.

But don't you want to be clear minded? Don't you remember what we read about gaining wisdom? “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.”

That is the blessing of clear wise thinking, but too many road accidents, for example, are caused by people who think they can drive after a couple of drinks, or whilst answering the phone or under the influence of medication or drugs and I suspect that too many of us cause injury to others or damage around our homes because we are addicted to the root cause of all those; our own sense of pride – that we can manage, that we can multi-task, that we don't need help, or to read instructions, or to put something down whilst we do something else, or that we are simply more competent than other people in our situation.

No, wise people do not allow their minds to be clouded by anything otherwise they will forget what is important and often cause suffering. But do you see? How our thinking, our decision making becomes clouded by more than just chemicals?

When he writes to the Romans Paul talks repeatedly about our pre-Christian lives when we were slaves to sin – controlled by our rebellious nature, listen to how he describes what that is like, “For although they [that is sinful people with evidence of God all around them] knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.” (Rom 1:21-22).

Our most dangerous addiction is to sin. Alcohol destroys our liver, cigarettes fill our lungs with tar, but sin is even more deadly because the wages of sin is death. It clouds our thoughts, it puffs us up with pride and self-sufficiency, it distracts us and deadens the pain as we slowly slip towards a Christless eternity.

If we are addicted to anything which replaces God as number 1 in our lives then we are in trouble – Paul’s point that people were foolish was exactly because they turned to idols and an idol is anything which replaces God on the throne of our lives.

So perhaps you are thinking, “Well, I don’t need to give up alcohol, or I don’t smoke” but every single one of us has an addiction to sin, it turns us into enemies of God, it redirects what we do with our money and our time and it turns our thoughts away from glorifying God to satisfying ourselves.

But the truly wise person has unclouded thoughts, again as Paul puts it to the Romans, “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their

minds set on what the Spirit desires.” And the Spirit that we are called to obey is not the one that comes out of a bottle.

All this is crucially important to God because our addiction to sin, be it to something as tangible as wine, or as subtle as pride will not bring us happiness, Proverbs 23 (29-35) says, “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. They hit me, you will say, but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?”

God loves the world so much, remember, that he sent us the greatest detox ever – his Son to do away with sin our sin on the cross so that we could be free of it and know life in all its clarity and all its fullness as his friends. So because our bodies are temples where the Holy Spirit lives, they need to be places which are cleaned out and kept as acceptable dwellings for God and that means not being ruled by any addiction and not allowing sin to control us but rather as this year's verse reminds us, to have bodies which proclaim God's Salvation and praise his name and we can only ever do that with clear minds that fear the Lord.

You see, although our indulgences and our sin seems good now Jesus encourages us to see the big picture. Don't slip into thinking that this life is all that there is; “eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die”, because we will face an eternity, the only question being, will it be with or without God.

If we become so ruled by our wants and desires; our selfishness, even things which seem innocent to us - controlled for example by our love for our families, or our job. If we focus in on the here and now then we will be totally unprepared for the day when Jesus returns. Listen to what Jesus says in Luke 21: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day [the Day of the Lord], will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”

So the message is this; our lives are filled with good things; cars, mobile phones, football teams, money, ipods, families, friends even new wine, but we are not to become slaves to any of them because that will lead us to idolatry and sin. As we move towards Lent and another opportunity to give something up let's consider how we need to have an unclouded focus on God as we serve only him and wait with eager expectation for Jesus to return.