LET'S HAVE THAT TALK ABOUT ALCOHOL
Prov. 20:1; 23:29-35

I was born smack-dab in the middle of the Baby Boom Generation. My parents grew up during the Great Depression and my dad fought World War II. But there’s another thing we baby-boomers have in common. We grew up in an era where everybody smoked. My parents smoked. Their friends smoked. We had ashtrays in every room—in fact, making an ashtray was a pretty common project in grade school art classes. I remember my doctor checking me over on the exam table with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. Nobody thought two things about it. Cigarette ads owned television: “I’d rather fight than switch!” “I’d walk a mile for a Camel.” “Welcome to Marlboro Country.” “Winston tastes good like a cigarette should.” There was no such thing as smoking and no-smoking sections in restaurants. When I was a busboy at a local restaurant, part of my job was cleaning the ashtray after clearing the dishes from a table—I cleaned a lot of ashtrays. I was around cigarette smoke for much of my life. I have no clue how many packs I smoked second-hand across the years.

And growing up in the home of a family who attended a mainline church, it was also common in our home to see some beer in the fridge and some Mogan-David Wine in the cabinet. On rare occasions, even a mixed-drink called a high ball was put together and consumed. I never saw either of my parents drunk, neither drank much, my mom barely at all, but neither had any moral or biblical qualms about drinking a little alcohol now and then.

Somewhere along the way, smoking became a national sin. Warning labels from the Surgeon General showed up on cigarette packages. Television ads were removed from the air. Cities started creating smoke-free zones. Other than the loss of personal freedom involved and the way smokers are often treated like something less than human, I don’t mind these changes. I can’t stand the smell of cigarette smoke. But in spite of the fact that alcohol does way more damage to families and society than smoking, alcohol gets a pass.

Now, any historians in the congregation will be quick to say, “Alcohol hasn’t always gotten a pass. Remember the Volstead Act—Prohibition? It didn’t work.” No, it didn’t. People still got their booze, and the crime involved in making it happen made legends out of people like Al Capone and Eliot Ness. Whether those rip-roaring years of Prohibition have anything to do with alcohol
getting a pass in today’s culture, who can say? But alcohol—America’s drug of choice—sure does get a pass.

And the church doesn’t say much about it one way or the other anymore. Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have never had much to say about alcohol. But there was a day when conservative churches were all over it. Listen to this excerpt from a Billy Sunday sermon called “Get on the Water Wagon.”

I am the sworn, eternal, uncompromising enemy of the Liquor Traffic. I ask no quarter and I give none. I have drawn the sword in defense of God, home, wife, children and native land, and I will never sheathe it until the undertaker pumps me full of embalming fluid, and if my wife is alive, I think I shall call her to my bedside and say: “Nell, when I am dead, send for the butcher and skin me, and have my hide tanned and made into drumheads, and hire men to go up and down the land and beat the drums and say, ’My husband, Bill Sunday still lives and gives the whiskey gang a run for its money.”

When I joined the Baptist church in 1974, I noticed in the hymnal a copy of something called “The Church Covenant,” and there was a line in there about members agreeing to neither use alcohol nor sell it. It was in the hymnal, but in all the years since, I never heard anybody talk about it except every now and then when a Youth Minister would warn kids to steer clear of it. I never heard any pastor preach on it except when “drunkenness” was included in one of the sin lists in the Bible passage they were preaching. I’ve been preaching most every Sunday since 1981, and I’ve only preached on it once—and that was on a Sunday night in 1992.

I

Sorry about that. We should have had this talk before. And as I was putting together this Front Porch Wisdom series, I sensed God leading me to have that talk today. There’s not enough alcohol in the Bible to taste it, but there’s probably enough to at least get a whiff of it when you flip through the pages. And a lot of it makes it difficult to build the case for total abstinence.

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There are some places in Deuteronomy where the gift of wine is viewed as God’s blessing (7:13) and the absence of wine is viewed as a curse (28:39).

There’s the text in Ecclesiastes 9:7 about drinking wine with a merry heart.

And of course, there’s Jesus’ first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Jesus certainly would have made it a lot easier on us Baptist preachers if He had turned wine into water. But He didn’t.

I wish I could say that there is a proof-text in the Bible that calls for God’s people to abstain from alcohol, but there’s not. There are plenty of verses that label drunkenness a sin and warn of the dangers of alcohol, but there are no verses that say drinking alcohol is always a sin. I wish I could make a biblical case that there was, but I can’t. Drinking alcohol is not always sinful, but it’s not always wise either. It’s a matter of personal conscience like the foods we eat and the entertainment choices we make. So we better be wise as we discern what’s best for us in this matter. I invite you to open your Bible to Proverbs 20:1 and 23:29-35. Solomon helps us here.

And we need his help because nobody does a better job selling their product than companies that market alcohol. They spend a fortune on enticing us to drink their products. If your only basis of judgment concerning alcohol was magazine and television ads, you’d conclude that alcohol is essential if you want to hang out with pretty girls and handsome guys, if you want to be popular, if you want to be where the action is, if you want to live the happy life, if you want to taste the Rocky Mountains, if you want to be one of the most interesting people in the world. “Hey,” says alcohol, “throwing back a few brewskies with your pals, well, it doesn’t get any better than this.” That’s what alcohol says when it gets paid to say it.

But the truth paints a different story. Alcohol is closely linked to crime. Alcohol is involved in:

- 40% of all violent crimes, including murder.
- 37% of rapes and sexual assaults
- 27% of aggravated assaults
- 25% of simple assaults
• And 36% of those in jail were under the influence of alcohol when they committed the crimes that put them there.²

And those statistics don’t count the cost to families and employers and communities who must deal with the consequences of alcohol use and abuse. And none of this brings comfort to those whose loved ones were killed or disabled by some drunk driver. Alcohol gets paid to say what a wonderful elixir of life it is and what happiness it brings. But the larger truth is a different story, a tragic story of families, fortunes, jobs, and lives lost.

Solomon is getting at this larger truth when he tries to wise us up about alcohol. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the texts).

The Surgeon General won’t put a warning label on alcohol, but Solomon does in these texts.

II

Alcohol is a mocker. Alcohol makes fun of us and fools of us. In my day it was Otis Campbell riding a cow through Mayberry, thinking he was on a horse—hilarious! It was comedian Foster Brooks, doing monologues while he pretended to be drunk stuttering and stammering and tripping all over his tongue—hysterical! It was Animal House and college kids doing things in their drunkenness they would never have done in their sobriety. Well, slap my knee! That’s all staged humor built on the fact that alcohol mocks us, ridicules us and makes us do ridiculous things.

But it’s not so funny in real life. I remember a great uncle who used to sit in his chair and get drunk most every night—which would embarrass my aunt to no end. I remember a cousin who in a drunken fit over his wife’s threat to leave him, tore up their home, embarrassed himself and his family, and left those of us who were trying to keep his wife safe, on pins and needles wondering when he would show up at our door and what he might do when he got there. I don’t think I laughed even once during that ordeal. Only alcohol was busting a gut.

I experimented with alcohol for a few months in the middle of my senior year in high school. Didn’t feel pressured to do it. I decided I wanted to do it. In the process, one of my friends got so drunk on cherry vodka that he puked all over himself and the Dairy Queen. We cleaned that up, took him to a friend’s house to sober him up, and laid him the bathtub so if he puked anymore it would be easier to clean. Shortly thereafter, even before I got serious about Jesus, I decided alcohol didn’t live up to the hype. I didn’t like it anyway. And I didn’t like what it did to me and to my friends. I was breaking the law to do it and encouraging others to break the law to provide it. I was a fool. So I said, “I’m done with alcohol.” Alcohol is a mocker. All the supposed good times it creates don’t make up for that one bad time, because that one bad time could get somebody killed or maimed or a criminal record. Alcohol is a mocker. And in families where alcoholism lives, alcohol mocks those families for generations, breaking children’s hearts and creating a home that functions not as a haven but as a ticking time bomb. Alcohol is a mocker.

III

Alcohol can lead us astray. The choice to consume alcohol is a choice to give away self-control. It’s a choice to put yourself in a position that is unwise, says Solomon. Because alcohol breaks down inhibitions, hampers quality judgment, and destroys self-control, those who use it are essentially putting the keys of their life in alcohol’s hands and saying, “Take me where you want me to go.” Would you put the keys of your life in the hand of a stranger you could not trust? Then why would you put the keys of your life in the hands of alcohol. You can’t trust alcohol. You can’t be sure when to say when. You can’t be sure what you’ll do under alcohol’s influence. How many drinkers, when told what they did under the influence of alcohol, have said, “I can’t believe I did that”? This is why Solomon says that “whoever is led astray by alcohol is not wise.”

I don’t know about you, but I can lead myself astray enough without the help of alcohol, so why would I want to double-down by adding alcohol to the mix? That’s just foolish, says Solomon. Alcohol can lead us astray.

IV
Alcohol promises pleasure and delivers trouble. It looks good there in the bottle or the glass. It sparkles. It foams. It may even go down smooth on that first or second drink. It promises friendship, happy times, liquid courage. But in the end, it bites like a rattlesnake. In chapter 23, Solomon catalogues what alcohol delivers.

- It delivers “woe” — Ask anyone who ever woke up with a hangover. “What was I thinking?”
- It delivers “sorrow” — “Did I really do that? How could I have been so foolish?”
- It delivers “strife” — Alcohol contributes to fights in bars and fights in the home.
- It delivers “complaining” — over the mess alcohol makes of a life and a family.
- It delivers “wounds without cause” — “How’d I get that bruise? How did I cut my head?” And in the words of Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville:

      I don't know the reason
      I stayed here all season
      Nothin' to show but this brand new tattoo
      But it's a real beauty
      A Mexican cutie
      How it got here I haven't a clue
      Wastin' away in Margaritaville.

- It delivers “redness of eyes” — And if you drink long enough you’ll end up with yellow eyes, 20 or 30 extra pounds, a fried brain, and a liver that looks like Swiss cheese.

- “Your eyes will see strange things” ... Hallucinations are not that unusual for someone who is rip-roaring drunk.

- “Your heart will utter perverse things” ... People under the influence of alcohol will say perverse things they’d never say sober, and they will do sinful things they’d never do sober.
• You’ll have the up and down sensation which can leave a drinker reeling with a spinning head and feeling sea-sick. The initial buzz becomes a buzz saw.

• You’ll dull your senses ... You might get beat up but won’t feel it much because the alcohol numbs your pain in the moment ... but the next day will tell a different story.

For some reason the alcohol peddlers forget to tell us this story when they’re pimping their product. So, wise Solomon tells us the story instead. Alcohol promises pleasure and delivers trouble.

V

And alcohol can enslave. At the end of v. 35, Solomon writes, “When shall I awake? I must have another drink.” Did you get that? I “must have.” Alcohol can enslave. Most drinkers don’t get that far, but plenty do. They get to that place where they no longer choose to have a drink; they have to have a drink. We call this alcoholism. This is when alcohol becomes not a choice but an addiction, not a may have but a must. This is when people drink to escape troubles, when they drink most every day, when they hide alcohol and sneak drinks when no one can see them. And if you asked them to stop drinking for a month, they couldn’t do it. They’ll say they can, but they can’t. This is a problem drinker for sure, probably an alcoholic, certainly a person who “must have another drink.” Alcohol can enslave.

If this describes you, you need to seek help. You need Celebrate Recovery or A.A. or some group like that which helps you own your problem and gives you resources to overcome. And you need the Lord. The Lord will help you win this battle if you seek Him in the fight. Jesus bore this sin on the cross. Jesus bore this shame on the cross. He can help you. He doesn’t want you enslaved to alcohol; He wants you enslaved to Him. Listen to Paul in Ephesians 5:18: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” Live under the influence of the Spirit, not alcohol. Seek courage in Christ, not alcohol. Seek freedom from worry and stress in Jesus, not a bottle of booze. Seek joy in the Jesus the joy-giver, not a six-pack of beer. Be enslaved to Christ—a good and wise thing. Not to alcohol—a bad and foolish thing. Alcohol can get in the way of responsible discipleship in our Christian walk. The person who “must have another drink” lives for that drink,
not for Christ. “But I’d never become an alcoholic.” Every alcoholic in the world has said the same thing. The only way to be sure you never become an alcoholic is to never take that first drink. That goes especially for those who may be genetically or environmentally disposed to such things. Alcohol can enslave. Wise people recognize this.

VI

The use of alcohol requires wisdom. If it didn’t, it wouldn’t show up in the Proverbs. Because the Bible does not forbid its use entirely, Christ-followers must exercise great wisdom here. All Christ-followers won’t land in the same place on this matter. And the Bible gives tea-totalers no leverage to condemn those who choose to take a drink now and then or those who as Paul told Timothy, take a little wine for the sake of their health (1 Tim. 5:23). You and I can’t choose for anyone else; we must choose for ourselves.

I chose decades ago to abstain from alcohol. I tried it and didn’t like it or what it did to my friends and me. And once I got serious about Jesus, I thought abstention was my wisest choice. Not because I thought taking a drink now and then was a sin, but for reasons like these: I didn’t want anyone to start drinking because they saw me drinking. And if my children ever took up drinking it wouldn’t be because they learned it from me. That’s my choice. You’ve got to make yours. (And let me say parenthetically that teenagers really have no choice: it’s against the law for you, and you haven’t accumulated enough wisdom to handle alcohol. For you, drinking is a sin to avoid.) But we adults do have choices to make, and we need to exercise wisdom in our choosing.

Years ago I came across someone’s reflection on the use of alcohol. I offer it to you as a means for wise evaluation. Have you ever known ...

• A man to lose his job because he drank too little?

• A doctor to advise his patient, “Your chances to survive this surgery would be better if you were a drinker”?

• An employer seeking a person for a responsible position to say, “Give me a drinker every time”?
• A **wife** to explain, “My husband would be the best man in the world if he would only drink more”?

• A **husband** to say, “My wife would be a better mother to our children if she spent more time in bars”?

• A **defendant** in a courtroom to seek acquittal with the plea, “If I had been drunk I never would have done it”?

• An **insurance company** to offer reduced premiums to drinkers?

• A **police chief** to advocate more consumption of alcohol as a means of reducing crime?

• Or a **Christian** to say, “I'd be a better person and a more convincing witness for Jesus if I just drank more alcohol”?

It really doesn’t take any great wisdom to answer those questions, does it? Common sense and life experience answer those questions. But **only you** can answer the larger question: in this alcohol saturated culture, what’s the wisest choice I can make concerning my own use of such beverages?

I’m glad we finally had this little talk. I’m thankful for the wise guidance of the Scriptures in this matter. And as you make your choices, I just hope you’ll listen more to the Scripture than to the booze peddlers or the opinions of your pals. Because as Solomon says in another place: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom …” (Prov. 9:10).

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