

A Cup of Cheer

Proverbs 23:29-35

August 2, 2020



Please read Proverbs 23:29-35 before going further in this manuscript.

I've titled today's sermon, "a cup of cheer." This phrase actually comes from the classic Christmas Carol, "A Holly Jolly Christmas." Surely most of us know the words, right? "Have a holly, jolly Christmas. It's the best time of the year. I don't know if there'll be snow but have a cup of cheer." Now, I suppose that someone could argue that "a cup of cheer" is just a personification of drinking in the "Christmas Spirit." But, this song is probably more likely referring... to alcohol, a "cup of cheer." This might include spiked eggnog, a glass of wine, or a bottle of beer.¹ I share this opening illustration, as a way to help us begin to think about just how prevalent and well-accepted, that drinking alcohol has become in our society.

The fact is, we have all kinds of drinking songs out there, that many of us know, and even "enjoy": One Bourbon, One Scotch, and One Beer (George Thorogood & The Destroyers 1977/1985) Margaritaville (Jimmy Buffet 1977) There's a Tear in My Beer (Hank Williams 1989) I've Got Friends in Low Places (where the whiskey pours and beer chases) (Garth Brooks 1990) Drink a Beer (Luke Bryan 2013) (A number of these seem to be country songs for some reason!) Whiskey Glasses (Morgan Wallen 2018) which has the chorus: "Line'em up, line'em up, line'em up, line'em up. Knock'em back, knock'em back, knock'em back, knock'em back. Fill'em up, fill'em up, fill'em up, fill'em up." Sometimes we use alcohol as a "cup of cheer,"² sometimes it's how we cope with pain and heartache, sometimes it's simply an addiction that we've developed, and there are probably any number of other reasons why we drink alcohol. Regardless of our own personal experience with alcohol, today's text invites us to consider the Wisdom & Warnings offered in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 23:29-35 has three important warnings regarding alcohol. First of all,

Proverbs warns that...

1 Alcohol can bring sorrow and strife to ANYONE. Proverbs 23:29-30 begin, "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." Alcohol is no respecter of persons; it's glad to bring sorrow and strife to ANYONE. Regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, etc. it is fully inclusive in its invitation. Even if we choose to completely abstain from alcohol, the drinking choices of those around us, can impact us deeply. For some of us, our family history has set a very good example of drinking alcohol responsibly. For others, there's never been anything responsible about it.

In my own family of origin, by the time I was about 6 years old, our family simply didn't drink alcohol, at all. When I went off to college, I hadn't touched the stuff. I went to a Christian college where the lifestyle statement prohibited us from drinking alcohol. Certainly a few of the students still drank on/off of campus, but most of us didn't. Two weeks out of college, I was hired by a very conservative church. One of their membership requirements was, "to abstain from the sale and use of alcohol." Therefore, if you wanted to be a member of that church, not only could you not DRINK alcohol, but you also could not WORK somewhere that sold alcohol. Therefore, until I was 30 years old, I didn't really need to make any choices regarding whether or not I would drink alcohol. I simply followed the rules of the communities that I was part of.

All of this changed when I came to the E-Free Church of Bemidji. At times, I've joked around with friends from my old church, "now I'm free!" But all joking aside, this is where verses like 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 are instructive, "'I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial.

¹ There are at least two ironies to this particular set of lyrics: The first irony is that we often have our young children sing these words in their Christmas musical performances. They're up there singing their hearts out, with great gusto, urging all of us to lift up our glass as a toast to one another. The other irony, is that this "cup of cheer" is being hoisted up in celebration of Christmas of all things. Christmas is meant to be a celebration of the birth of Jesus; so, needless to say, it seems at least a little out of place to put booze in a Christmas Carol.

² Just a side note, see <https://www.thespruceeats.com/beer-is-proof-that-god-loves-us-and-wants-us-to-be-happy-353267>

‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.” I didn’t realize what a gift abstaining from alcohol truly was until I got into my early 30s. I was getting to know my biological father for the first time. He was a HEAVY drinker, born and raised in northern WI. And believe me, there are some heavy drinkers in WI; my dad was one of them. The more I got to know my biological dad, and hear his story, the more I realized that God had protected me from SO MUCH of the sorrow and strife that comes with drinking. But sadly, I wasn’t protected from all of it. Drinking had made my dad VERY difficult to be around. His drinking had driven most people away. I watched my dad slowly drink himself to death. It’s not fun to talk about, but I can still remember sitting at his bedside in Las Vegas, as the doctor explained to me that there were complications from heart failure, and that he wasn’t going to make it. If the hospital hadn’t found a way to reach me, and have me fly down to Las Vegas to be with him, my dad probably would have died alone in that hospital bed. Sometimes I wonder how different my dad’s life would have been, if he’d been able to somehow overcome his addiction to alcohol, or even completely abstained from it, in the first place. I also think about how different my life might have been, and the lives of my other family members. Proverbs warns us: Alcohol can bring sorrow and strife to ANYONE. We would ALL do well, to heed this warning. Proverbs (also) warns that...

2 Alcohol sparkles... then bites. Proverbs 23:31-32 warns us, “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.” Advertisers always make alcohol look SO good. There’s always someone sitting on the beach in Hawaii, overlooking the ocean from a lawn chair, with one of those little umbrellas in their drink. Proverbs wisely warns us not to gaze at it; not to be lured into its trap. It’s not much different than what we learned about seduction two Sundays ago. Here are the first two main points from that sermon: 1 Seduction strives to derail our devotion to Jesus. 2 Seduction strategizes for our destruction.



These two points are just as true for alcohol: 1 Alcohol strives to derail our devotion to Jesus. Proverbs 20:1 warns, “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” Must like seduction, alcohol leads us astray. 2 Alcohol strategizes for our destruction. The strategy begins by making the alcohol “go down smoothly.” Proverbs 23:31-32 warns us, “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.” Now, it wouldn’t go down smoothly at all, if we drank straight alcohol. That’s why verse 30 talks about “bowls of mixed wine.” Alcohol is almost always mixed with some kind of a spice or honey or sweetener. These mixings not only make them taste better, so that they go down smoother, but they also keep us alive. In other words, straight alcohol would probably kill us. Even when it’s mixed though, in the end, alcohol “bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.” That’s an accurate description because alcoholic drinks contain ethyl alcohol or ethanol.”³ Ethanol is not only found in alcoholic beverages but it’s also used as a gasoline additive and in things like nail polish remover and household cleaning products, and so on.⁴ So when we choose to drink alcohol, we are choosing to put a certain amount of poison into our system. Too much of this poison, leads to alcohol poisoning. Thus, the warning from God’s Word, “In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper.” Proverbs warns us that alcohol sparkles... then bites. We would do well, to heed this warning. Alcohol’s strategy isn’t content, to just poison us though. Proverbs warns that...

3 Alcohol can impair our ability to apply wisdom.^{5 6} Proverbs 23:33 describes it this way, “Your eyes will see strange sights, and your mind will imagine confusing things.” It’s almost comical from

³ <https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/addiction/alcohol-poisoning-overview#1>

⁴ <https://www.msdsolnline.com/2014/04/21/ethanol-versatile-common-and-potentially-dangerous/>

⁵ Proverbs 23:34-35 illustrates just how impaired alcohol can make us, “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?’” In other words, this person is passed out asleep, when they should be keeping alert. From their post up-top of the rigging, they should be keeping watch for danger to themselves and their shipmates. But instead of having their wits about them, they are too inebriated to recognize the dangers around them, or to feel the pain from their beating. See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 15-31*, Eerdman’s, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, p. 266.

⁶ Their primary concern is finding their next drink. See Isaiah 5:11.

one point of view; because people act ridiculous when they're drunk. At times, we even have a good laugh about it. How many of us have heard a story on Monday morning about "how drunk someone got last weekend"? Some of us have probably tried on the "drunk goggles" that the D.A.R.E. program provides. They are meant to illustrate how dangerous it is to drink and drive. These goggles allow a completely sober person, to see for themselves, just how much our abilities are impaired by drinking.⁷ But, things like drunk goggles, also have an unintended impact: they remind us that being drunk, can be kind of fun, for a while; kind of silly. We can all have a good laugh at someone who is acting crazy and losing all their inhibitions, because they are TOTALLY wasted. Drinking has become so well-accepted and popular in our culture, that we continue to play more and more drinking "GAMES." Whether it's stacking cups or using funnels, or playing drunk Jenga or beer pong, or whatever else it may be. Many of us have had to learn this the hard way: drinking isn't a game. Nonetheless, our society continues to drink massive amounts of alcohol at alarming rates. Alcohol has left a broad path of destruction: incarcerations, ruined relationships, broken families, and grieving loved ones. I'm pretty sure that everyone reading this sermon, has at least one SILLY story, that we could tell about drinking.⁸ And we probably all have at least one TRAGIC story of terrible pain.

When we drink too much alcohol, it impairs our ability to apply wisdom. One of the best nicknames I've heard for alcohol is "stupid juice." And that's what Proverbs 23 is driving at; alcohol can make us do some pretty STUPID things.⁹ Unless we've somehow been tricked into drunkenness, we are fully responsible, for the dumb things we do while we're drunk. All of this being said, obviously not ALL drinking impairs our ability to apply wisdom. The fact is, a lot of people have just one drink and then they are done drinking. For many people, alcohol is just a social norm, like drinking a pop. And it has no more effect on us than pop, because we never drink enough alcohol to get drunk, or even a little "buzzed." For some of us, drinking isn't a coping technique or an addiction, or any other kind of negative. Drinking alcohol is simply drinking a beverage. It might be a glass of wine that is well-paired with a nice meal. It might be a cold beer with our pizza or burger. In other words, sorrow and strife don't automatically result just from drinking alcohol, but they do result from drinking TOO MUCH alcohol.

We know from Scripture, that even young Timothy was urged at one point to drink a LITTLE wine due to a stomach problem. In 1 Timothy 5:23, the Apostle Paul urges him, "Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses."¹⁰ But let's make sure to note, it says "a LITTLE wine."¹¹ It can be a wise and godly decision, to practice total abstinence from alcohol. But it can also be a wise and godly decision, to practice moderation and self-control when we drink alcohol. Staying sober is the key; staying sober is the biblical mandate. So even though one could make a fairly strong and convincing appeal for complete abstinence from alcohol, the clearer call from Scripture is a call to compete sobriety. To put it another way, complete abstinence and complete sobriety have this in common, they BOTH avoid the sorrow/strife and the snakebite, of drunkenness. They both practice God-honoring self-control.

1 Corinthians 6:12 gives a helpful perspective, "I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but I will not be mastered by anything." If we have grown addicted to alcohol, then it has become the master of our lives. We are now enslaved to it, and all of its painful and sinful consequences. If you or someone you know needs help with a drinking problem, there are many good resources available:

"Face It Together" is one of them right here in Bemidji. This is not a Christian agency, but it is a good place to get help. **"Reformers Unanimous"** has a program right down the road, at Bemidji

⁷ DARE also let's young people see some of the mangled vehicles that are the result of drunk driving.

⁸ Our families silly story has to do with a trip that we took to TX to see the Alamo. We were gifted a stay at a hotel that provided complimentary dinners each night. Our youngest daughter was excited to pour herself a big cup of apple juice. Only, the pitcher wasn't apple juice!

⁹ The Old Testament character Lot, is an example of doing something stupid while he was drunk. In Genesis 19:33-35, Lot commits two different acts of incest, but has no memory of either one. Conversely, in 2 Samuel 11:13, King David got Uriah drunk in hopes that he would go home and sleep with Bathsheba, whom David had gotten pregnant. But Uriah still made a noble choice despite his intoxication.

¹⁰ Consider also John 2:9 where Jesus turns the water into wine. Also, Luke 10:34 shows that wine was used topically by the Good Samaritan in caring for the injured.

¹¹ See discussion by Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: chapters 15-31*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2005, pp. 126-127 regarding Proverbs 20:1.

Baptist Church. (Several people from our church have gotten help there over the years.)¹² There are many other resources as well, just a Google search away.

Let me close by sharing several compelling reasons why Christ-followers need to stay sober-minded: at all times. **We need to stay sober SO THAT...**

1 We can avoid God's judgment on sinful living. 1 Peter 4:3-5 reminds us, "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead."¹³ We also need to stay sober SO THAT...

2 We can remain alert and pray. 1 Peter 4:7 says, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray."¹⁴ We also need to stay sober SO THAT...

3 We can resist the devil's schemes. 1 Peter 5:8 urges us, "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." We also need to stay sober SO THAT...

4 We can serve others well.¹⁵ Proverbs 31:4-5 offers us an important insight, "It is not for kings, Lemuel—it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights."¹⁶ Finally, we need to stay sober SO THAT...

5 We can make the most of gospel opportunities. Ephesians 5:15-18 says, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

Brother or Sister in Christ, if ever there was a time in our lives when we needed sober-minded wisdom, wisdom that is unimpaired by alcohol or anything else, surely the year 2020 is one of those times. Let's choose to be sober-minded and self-controlled so that we can be the fully devoted followers of Jesus that we need to be. So that we can make the most of every opportunity to accomplish our gospel mandate.

*This sermon was preached onsite & online at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on August 2, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson*

¹² <https://www.bemidjibaptist.com/addictions>

¹³ See Proverbs 23:19-21. Drunkenness is included toward the end of a long list of sinful attitudes/behaviors in Gal 5:19-21, "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; **drunkenness**, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

¹⁴ When Jesus was talking about the End Times He said this in Luke 21:34, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, **drunkenness** and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."

¹⁵ See also Ecclesiastes 10:17; Luke 12:45; 1 Timothy 3:3; and Titus 1:7.

¹⁶ Verses 6-7 go on to say, "Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish! Let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more." We shouldn't assume that the Bible is endorsing drunkenness here in any way. After all, drunkenness is a sin. It was often used as a painkiller in the days before aspirin and ibuprofen. But it is also being used here as contrast to highlight the importance of godly leaders remaining sober-minded for the sake of those they lead, some who are in poverty and great misery.