

Drunk and Disorderly for Jesus

A reflection on Ephesians 5:15-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 15th August 2021

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Message

Paul's word play on drunkenness is both a useful contrast and a useful comparison for Christian living.

Sermon

According to something I heard on the radio, last Friday was *National Prosecco Day*. Who knew that was a thing? Not me. I don't think my beloved was so surprised, but as far as I can tell, Margie's thought that every Friday for the last decade or so was *National Prosecco Day*, and she and her friends certainly do their bit to support the industry. I predictably failed to do my bit. Sparkling wine is a bit wasted on me. It's a pleasant enough drink if there is nothing better available, but for that sort of money I could buy several outstanding craft brewed beers and get a great deal more enjoyment out of them.

Besides, in the extract we heard tonight from his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery," but he doesn't say any such thing about beer, and every now and again a really really suspect method of biblical interpretation goes in your favour!

It reminds me of a conversation I had the other night with James' wife Jude. She was telling about a conversation she and James had had with some nutter who reckoned he had worked out from the Bible and the news exactly when Jesus was coming back. Jude had said to him, but didn't Jesus say that we can't know the day or the hour? Yeah, he replied, but he didn't say you can't know the month! Funnily enough, you can take the Bible so literally that it becomes absolutely full of holes again!!

I do want to spend some time looking at Paul's statement about drunkenness tonight, and I'm aiming to do it without resorting to that kind of dubious biblical gymnastics.

This letter has a couple of chapters of "practical applications" towards the end, and we began looking at them last week in that sermon that was 90% introduction. This whole sermon will probably be shorter than that introduction! Anyway, the short extract we heard this week follows straight on from what we heard last week, and I want to focus our consideration of it around Paul's quirky word-play on the image of drunkenness.

Paul writes, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit." In my paraphrase of the passage I've rendered it, "If you're going to go getting yourselves 'under the influence', make sure its the influence of the Spirit and not of the wine!" I was endeavouring to highlight the deliberate humour in Paul's words, because he is clearly playing with the image of "getting full", or as we might put it, "getting a skin-full".

He continues this play on images in the following verses where he uses the idea of singing together to illustrate what he's talking about. He's saying you don't need a "skin-full of booze" to get you singing together – there's another way.

One of the things that I think is really interesting about this play of images, is that it is double edged. Do you remember those exam questions you used to get where they'd name two things

and then ask you to “compare and contrast” them? Well this is a similar kind of thing. Paul is not simply setting up two patterns of behaviour and contrasting them – one good and the other bad. He is calling us to note some similarities as well.

We’re going to look at the contrasts first, but if you’re feeling unsettled that Paul might also be making a positive comparison between drunkenness and spiritual living, just remember that he wasn’t the first to do it. Remember what happened on the Day of Pentecost. The Book of Acts tells us that most of the onlookers thought that the newly Spirit-filled believers had just had a skin-full of booze. We’ll come back to that.

The contrast or opposition between a boozy lifestyle and a Spirit-filled lifestyle are more familiar to us. In some churches, being a non-drinker is considered to be one of the essential signs of your Christian commitment. The Methodists, the Salvation Army and, in some parts of the world, the Baptists have all been associated with a strong anti-alcohol stance. It will be no surprise to you that I don’t identify with that view – I enjoy a drink and I enjoy it fairly often. But I still recognise the contrast!

The image that Paul is using here is not simply that of drinking, it is that of drunkenness. There are various reasons why some people routinely drink to the point of drunkenness. It produces an altered state of consciousness, which can often be quite pleasurable, at least at the time, and I guess there are a few people who get drunk regularly just because they enjoy that experience.

My observation though, is that most of the people who regularly get drunk do so, not so much because they like the way it feels, but because they don’t like the way they feel the rest of the time. It is an escape, a way out. It is a way of numbing, for a while, the pressures and pains of a life that is not providing the satisfaction, joy and fulfilment that we all long for. When life is feeling like a failure, we tend to be less concerned about the consequences of something like drunkenness. It makes us feel a little better for a while and if things are crap anyway, it can’t make them that much worse.

Paul begins then by contrasting this with life ‘under the influence’ of the Holy Spirit. The contrast begins as a continuation of the practical instructions that began in last week’s reading. Here he is urging us to be careful and clear-headed in the ways we live. He tells us that we are living in evil times and that we can easily get sucked into wrong things if we don’t have our wits about us. “Live wisely. Don’t do anything stupid,” says Paul.

There’s no one more gullible than a drunk. Their defences are down and they’ll fall for anything. The one thing most drunks wake up dreading even more than a hang-over is hearing back what they did the night before. Even if it is not particularly bad, it might still seem embarrassing in the cold light of the next day.

Back when Acacia was in kindergarten, one of the kinder mums was very funny, even when dead straight sober, and she was from Glasgow which meant that her accent often made her jokes sound even funnier, and like many Glaswegians, she certainly liked a pint or four. I think she was the parents’ committee president or social secretary or something. Anyway, I was picking up Acacia the day after the night of the rowdy Kindergarten Community Trivia Night, and I overheard another mum saying to the Glaswegian one, “You were great last

night. Your second speech was an absolute cracker.” To which she replied, “O my f**king God. Did I make a *second* speech?!”

That dreadful moment when you have no idea what you might have done or said. And it can be a hell of a lot worse than finding out that you made a second and even funnier speech last night. Paul is clearly of the opinion that drunkenness, no matter how good it might feel at the time, is not the pathway to the fullness of life that God desires for us all. To find the pathway of the full and limitless life, you’ll need to have your wits about you. So the contrast is clear.

What about the comparison though? We are less used to thinking of good Christian living as being anything like habitual drunkenness, but I think Paul is doing this quite deliberately. And I think that perhaps the reason we have trouble with the image is because we have tended to fall into exactly the error that Paul was hoping to get us to avoid.

We are so used to thinking of Christianity as very nice and proper and sober and dignified, and Paul was wary that in encouraging us to be careful and wise we might over react and become stiff and starchy and miserly. Christians can be the ugliest people in the world when they get like that. They become lifeless and life-denying — no, no, no! — and Paul is hoping we won’t fall into that.

So he sets about counter balancing his good sober advice with this image of “drunk and disorderly” Christian living! His word-play on getting “full” suggests that he sees some similarities.

Today he might even have alluded to other drugs of choice, and encouraged us to get high on the Spirit. Paul draws on the image of alcohol as a social lubricant – as something that enables people to relax and celebrate and enjoy one another’s company. You know the image. We’ve all seen groups of people who might otherwise be rather uptight and distant having a few drinks and marching down the street arm in arm singing joyously at the top of their voices.

Paul picks up this idea and suggests that you don’t need alcohol to get you singing – getting high on the Holy Spirit can achieve the same desirable goal! He does suggest that “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” might be an improvement on bawdy drinking songs, but then Luther, Watts and Wesley all wrote hymns to the tunes of some of the drinking songs of their day. Our hymn “Covenant Wine” does the same thing with a drinking song from the sixties, written by Tom Paxton and then made a hit by the Fireballs. We should have sung it tonight if I had planned ahead better.

Someone (Mark Twain perhaps?) once said, “Alcohol doesn’t change a person, it just unmasks them.” Some drunks are violent, lecherous and belligerent. Some are pathetic, broken and sad. And some are uninhibitedly joyous, funny and sociable. It is clearly this latter group that Paul is holding up for comparison.

I remember at my induction service here, Alan Marr preached and told a story of being in Sydney the night of the Mardi Gras. By being in the wrong place at the wrong time, he found himself running into the protest march of the ultra-moralistic Festival of Light. Alan commented that in terms of a spirit of joy, colour, celebration and creativity, the contrast

between the two marches – the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras and the dour, predominantly ‘christian’ protest – could not have been more striking.

That comment was very much in the spirit of what Paul is saying here. If Christianity seems to be lifeless and starchy, then you’re doing it all wrong. We are, after all, followers of Jesus, and Jesus was accused, repeatedly, of being a drunkard and a glutton. And it is pretty hard to imagine how any starchy tea-totaler would ever get themselves accused of that. Not only was Jesus accused of that, but on another occasion, we are told that he produced gallons and gallons of good quality wine at a wedding where everybody had already had an absolute skin-full and had drunk the house dry.

Total abstinence is a very important and life-saving choice for some people, but it certainly wasn’t something that Jesus ever got himself known for or advocated as an essential for everyone else.

But Paul’s point here is not actually about whether you drink or not. There are drinkers who are miserable and judgmental and belligerent, and there are soft-drink-only people who are joyous and generous and gracious. Those are the kind of differences that matter, not whether you drink or not.

Jesus calls us to live life to the full; to love, and share, and celebrate. So lighten up! Loosen up! The Spirit of God is poured out. Get a ‘skin-full’ for Jesus!

Questions for thought and discussion

- What are some of the characteristics associated with drunkenness that take us away from living as Jesus would have us live?
- What are some of the characteristics associated with ‘teatotalism’ that take us away from living as Jesus would have us live?
- What are some of the characteristics associated with the ‘influence of alcohol’ that should be evident in those under the ‘influence of the Spirit’?
- How do we go about increasing those positive characteristics in our life together?