

The Heinous Sin of Drunkenness

By George Whitefield

Sermon 52

Ephesians 5:18 — “Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.”

The persons to whom these words were written, were the inhabitants of Ephesus, as we are told in the Acts, had been worshippers of the great goddess Diana, and, in all probability, worshipped the God Bacchus also; at the celebration of whose festivals, it was always customary, nay, part of their religion, to get drunk; as though there was no other way to please their God, but by turning themselves into brutes.

The apostle therefore in this chapter, amongst many other precepts more especially applicable to them, lays down this in the text; and exhorts them, as they had now, by the free grace of God, been turned from heathenish darkness to the light of the gospel, to walk as children of light, and no longer make it part of their religion or practice to be “drunk with wine, wherein is excess;” but, on the contrary, strive to “be filled with the Spirit” of that Savior, after whose name they were called, and whose religion taught them to abstain from a filthy sin, and to live soberly as they ought to live.

The world being now Christian, and the doctrines of the gospel every where received, one would imagine, there should be no reason for repeating the precept now before us. But alas, Christians! I mean Christians falsely so called, are led captive by all sin in general, and by this or drunkenness in particular; that was St. Paul to rise again from the dead, he might be tempted to think most of us were

turned back to the worship of dumb idols; had set up temples in honor of Bacchus; and made it part of our religion, as the Ephesians did of theirs, “to be drunk with wine, wherein is excess.”

Some of our civil magistrates have not been wanting to use the power given them from above, for the punishment and restraint of such evil doings; and I wish it could be said this plague of drinking, by what they have done, had been stayed amongst us. But alas! though their labor, we trust, has not been altogether in vain in the Lord, yet thousands, and I could almost say ten thousands, fall daily at our right-hand, by this sin of drunkenness, in our streets; nay, men seem to have made a covenant with hell, and though the power of the civil magistrate is exerted against them, nay, though they cannot but daily see the companions of their riot hourly, by this sin, brought to the grave, yet “they will rise up early to follow strong drink, and cry, To-morrow shall be as today, and so much the more abundantly; when we awake, we will seek it yet again.”

It is high time therefore, for thy ministers, O God, to lift up their voices like a trumpet; and since human threats cannot prevail, to set before them the terrors of the Lord, and try if these will not persuade them to cease from the evil of their doings.

But alas! how shall I address myself to them? I fear excess of drinking has made them such mere Nabals, that there is no speaking to them. And many of God's servants have toiled all their life-time in dissuading them from this sin of drunkenness, yet they will not forbear. However, at thy command, I will speak also, though they be a rebellious house. Magnify thy strength, O Lord, in my weakness, and grant that I may speak with such demonstration of the Spirit, and power, that from henceforward they may cease to act so unwisely, and this sin of drunkenness may not be their ruin.

Believe me, ye unhappy men of Belial, (for such, alas! this sin has made you) it is not without the strongest reasons, as well as utmost concern for your precious and immortal souls, that I now conjure you, in the Apostle's words, "Not to be drunk with wine, or any other liquor, wherein is excess."

For first, drunkenness is a sin which must be highly displeasing to God; because it is an abuse of his good creatures.

When God first made man, and had breathed into him the breath of life, he gave him dominion over the works of his hands; and every herb bearing seed, and every tree, in which was the fruit of a tree yielding seed, to him was given for meat: but when Adam had tasted the forbidden fruit, which was the only restraint laid upon him, he forfeited this privilege, and had no right, after he had disobeyed his Creator, to the use of any one of the creatures.

But, blessed be God, this charter, as well as all other privileges, is restored to us by the death of the second Adam, our Lord and Master Jesus Christ. Of every beast of the field, every fish of the sea, and whatsoever flieth in the air, or moveth on the face of the earth, that is fit for food, "we may freely eat," without scruple take and eat; but then, with this limitation, that we use them moderately. For God, by the death of Jesus, has given no man license to be intemperate; but, on the contrary, has laid us under the strongest obligations to live soberly, as well as godly, in this present world.

But the drunkard, despising the goodness and bounty of God, in restoring to us what we had so justly forfeited, turns his grace into wantonness; and as though the creature was not of itself enough subject to vanity, by being cursed for our sake, he abuses it still more, by making it administer to his lusts; and turns that wine which was intended to make glad his heart, into a deadly poison.

But thinkest thou, O drunkard, whosoever thou art, thou shalt escape the righteous judgment of God? No, the time will shortly come that thou must be no longer

steward, and then the Sovereign Lord of all the earth will reckon with thee for thus wasting his goods. Alas! wilt thou then wrest scripture any longer to thy own damnation? And because Jesus Christ turned water into wine at the marriage-feast, to supply the wants of his indigent host, say, that it is therefore meet to make merry, and be drunken. No, thou shalt be silent before him; and know, that though thou hast encouraged thyself in drunkenness by such-like arguments, yet for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.

But, secondly, what makes drunkenness more exceedingly sinful, is, that a man, by falling into it, sinneth against his own body.

When the apostle would dissuade the Corinthians from fornication, he urges this as an argument, "Flee fornication, brethren; for he that committeth fornication, sinneth against his own body." And may not I as justly cry out, Flee drunkenness, my brethren, since he that committeth that crime, sinneth against his own body? For, from whence come so many diseases and distempers in your bodies? Come they not from hence, even from your intemperance in drinking? Who hath pains in the head? Who hath rottenness in the bones? Who hath redness of eyes? He that tarries long at the wine, he that rises early to seek new wine. How many walking skeletons have you seen, whose bodies were once exceeding fair to look upon, fat and well-favored; but, by this sin of drinking, how has their beauty departed from them, and how have they been permitted to walk to and fro upon the earth, as though God intended to set them up, as he did Lot's wife, for monuments of his justice, that others might learn not to get drunk? Nay, I appeal to yourselves: are not many, for this cause, even now sickly among you? And have not many of your companions, whom you once saw so flourishing, like green bay trees, been brought by it with sorrow to their graves?

We might, perhaps, think ourselves hardly dealt with by God, was he to send us, as he did the royal Psalmist, to choose one plague out of three, whereby we should

be destroyed. But had the Almighty decreed to cut off man from the face of the earth, and to shorten his days, he could not well send a more effectual plague, than to permit men, as they pleased, to over-charge themselves with drunkenness; for though it be a slot, yet it is a certain poison. And if the sword has slain its thousands, drunkenness has slain its ten thousands.

And will not this alarm you, O ye transgressors? Will not this persuade you to spare yourselves, and to do your bodies no harm? What, have you lost the first principles of human nature, the fundamental law of self-preservation? You seem to have a great fondness for your bodies; why, otherwise, to gratify the inordinate appetites, do you drink to excess? But surely, if you truly loved them, you would not thus destroy them; and was there no other argument to be urged against drunkenness, the consideration that it will destroy those lives you are so fond of, one would imagine, should be sufficient.

I know, indeed, that it is a common answer, which drunkards make to those, who, out of love, would pull them as firebrands out of the fire, we are no body's enemy but our own. But this, instead of being an excuse for, is an aggravation of their guilt: for (not to mention that the drunkenness of one man has clothed many a family with rags, and that it is scarce possible for a person to be drunk, without tempting his neighbor also) not to mention these, and many other ill consequences, which would prove such an excuse to be entirely false: yet what is dearer to a man than himself? And if he himself be lost, what would all the whole world avail him? But how wilt thou stand, O man, before the judgment-seat of Christ, and make such an excuse, when thou shalt be arraigned before him as a self-murderer? Will it then be sufficient, thinkest thou, to say, I was no man's enemy but my own? No; God will then tell thee, that thou oughtest to have glorified him with thy spirit, and with thy body, which were his; and since thou hast, by intemperance, destroyed thy body, he will destroy both thy body and soul in hell.

But thirdly, what renders drunkenness more inexcusable, is, that it robs a man of his reason.

Reason is the glory of a man; the chief thing whereby God has made us to differ from the brute creation. And our modern unbelievers have exalted it to such a high degree, as even to set it in opposition to revelation, and so deny the Lord that bought them. But though, in doing this, they greatly err, and whilst they profess themselves wise, become real fools; yet we must acknowledge, that reason is the candle of the Lord, and whosoever puts it out, shall bear his punishment, whosoever he be.

But yet, this the drunkard does. Nebuchadnezzar's curse he makes his choice, his reason departeth from him; and then what is he better than a brute?

The very heathen kings were so sensible of this, that, in order to deter their young princes from drinking, they used to make their slaves get drunk, and be exposed before them. And didst thou but see thine own picture, O drunkard, when, after having drowned thy reason, thou staggerest to and fro, like one of the fools in Israel, and seest thy very companions making songs upon thee, surely thou wouldst not return to thy vomit again, but abhor thyself in dust and ashes!

When David, in a holy ecstasy, was dancing before the ark, Michal, Saul's daughter, despised him in her heart; and when he came home, she said, "How glorious was the king of Israel today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the hand-maids of his servants, as one of the vain fellows shamelessly uncovereth himself." But may not every one that meets a drunkard, more justly say, How glorious does he, that was made a little lower than the angels, look today, when, unmindful of his dignity, he has by drinking robbed himself of his reason, and reduced himself to a level with the beasts that perish.

But what if God, in the midst of one of these drunken fits, should arrest thee by death, and say unto thee, "Thou fool, this moment shall thy soul be required of

thee.” O! how shouldst thou appear in those filthy garments before that God, in whose sight the heavens are not clean. And how knowest thou, O man, but this may be thy lit? Hast thou not known many summoned at such an unguarded hour? And what assurance hast thou, that thou shalt not be the next? Because God has forborn thee so long, thinkest thou he will forbear always? No, this is rather a sign that he will come at an hour thou lookest not for him; and since his goodness and long-suffering has not led thee to repentance, he will cut thee down, and not permit thee to cumber the ground any longer. Consider this then, all ye that count it a pleasure to turn yourselves into brutes, lest God pluck you away by a sudden death, and there be none to deliver you.

Fourthly, there is a farther aggravation of this crime, that it is an inlet to, and forerunner of many other sins; for it seldom comes alone.

We may say of drunkenness, as Solomon does in strife, that it is like the letting out of water; for we know not what will be the end thereof. Its name is Legion; behold a troop of sins cometh after it. And, for my own part, when I see a drunkard, with the holy Prophet, when he looked in Hazael's face, I can hardly forbear weeping, to consider how many vices he may fall into, ere he comes to himself again.

What horrid incest did righteous Lot commit with his own daughters, when they had made him drunk? And, I doubt not, but there are many amongst you, who have committed such crimes when you have deprived yourselves of your reason by drinking, that were you to hear of them, your heart, like Nabal's, after he was told how he had abused David when he was drunk, would die within you. And, had any one told you, when you were sober, that you would have been guilty of such crimes, you would have cried out, with Hazael before-mentioned, “Are thy servants so many dogs, that they should do that?”

But no marvel that drunkards commit such crimes; for drunkenness drives the Holy Spirit from them; they become mere machines for the devil to work up to

what he pleases; he enters into them, as he entered into the herd of swine; and no wonder if they then commit all uncleanness, and any other crime, with greediness. But this leads me to a

Fifth consideration, which highly aggravates the sin of drunkenness, it separates the Holy Spirit from us.

It is to be hoped, that no one here present need be informed, that before we can be assured we are Christians indeed, we must receive the Holy Ghost, must be born again from above, and have the Spirit of God witnessing with our spirits, that we are the sons of God. This, this alone is true Christianity; and without the cohabitation of this blessed Spirit in our hearts, our righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, and we shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of God.

But now, drunkards do in effect bid this blessed Spirit to depart from them: for what has he to do with such filthy swine? They have no log of share in the Spirit of the Son of David. They have chased him out of their hearts, by defiling his temple; I mean their bodies. And he can no more hold communion with them, than light can have communion with darkness, or Christ have concord with Belial.

The apostle, therefore, in the words of the text, exhorts the Ephesians, “not to be drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but to be filled with the Spirit;” thereby implying, that drunkenness and the Spirit of God could never dwell in the same heart. And in another epistle, he bids them to avoid unprofitable conversation, as a thing which grieved the Holy Spirit: whereby alone they could be sealed to the day of redemption. And if unprofitable conversation grieves the Holy Spirit, at what an infinite distance must drunkenness drive him from the hearts of men?

O that you were wise! That you would consider what a dreadful thing it is to have the Spirit of the loving God depart from you! For, assure yourselves, if you live without him, you will live without God in the world. You are in the same

miserable forlorn condition as Saul was, when an evil spirit of the Lord came upon him; and you are only so many vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. But this brings me to a

Sixth reason against the sin of drunkenness; it absolutely unfits a man for the enjoyment of God in heaven, and exposes him to his eternal wrath.

To see and enjoy God, and to be like the blessed angels, always beholding the face of our heavenly Father, in the glories of his kingdom, is such an unspeakable happiness, that even wicked men, though they will not live the life of the righteous, cannot but wish their future state to be like his.

But think you, O ye drunkards, that you shall ever be partakers of this inheritance with the saints in light? Do you flatter yourselves, that you, who have made them often the subject of your drunken songs, shall now be exalted to sing with them the heavenly songs of Zion? No, as by drunkenness you have made your hearts cages of unclean birds, with impure and unclean spirits must you dwell.

A burning Tophet, kindled by God's wrath, is prepared for your reception, where you must suffer the vengeance of eternal fire, and in vain cry out for a drop of water to cool your tongues. Indeed you shall drink, but it shall be a cup of God's fury: for in the hand of the Lord there will be a cup of fury, it will be full mixed, and as for the dregs thereof, all the drunkards of the land shall suck them out.

But perhaps you may not believe this report. These words may be looked upon by you as idle tales, and I may seem to you as Lot did to his sons-in-law, when he came to warn them to get up out of Sodom, "as one that mocketh." But if you believe not me, believe eternal truth itself, which has positively declared, that no drunkard shall ever enter into his kingdom.

And I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that as surely as the Lord rained fire and brimstone, as soon as Lot went out of Sodom, so surely will

God cast you into a lake of fire and brimstone, when he shall come to take vengeance on them that know not God, and have not obeyed the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Behold then I have told you before; remember, that you this day were informed what the end of drunkenness would be. And I summon you, in the name of that God whom I serve, to meet me at the judgment-seat of Christ, that you may acquit both my Master and me; and confess, with your own mouths, that your damnation was of yourselves, and that we are free from the blood of you all.

But, Lord, has no one believed our report? Wilt thou suffer so many words to be spoken in vain, if it be yet in vain? No, methinks I see some pricked to the heart, and ready to cry out, in the language of David to Abigail, “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to speak unto us.” For surely, unless he had sent thee, this sin of drunkenness had been our ruin: but now, since we find whither it will lead us, we are resolved to drink no liquor to excess while the world stands, lest we should be tormented in the flames of hell.

But alas! How shall we be delivered from the power of this sin? Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? So hard, almost, will it be for you who have been accustomed to be intemperate, to learn to live sober.

But do not despair; for what is impossible with man, is possible with God. Of whom then should you seek for succor, but of him your Lord? Who, though for this sin of drunkenness, he might justly turn away his face from you.

Yet observe, first, if you pour out your hearts before him in daily prayer, and ask assistance from above, it may be God will endue you with power from on high, and make you more than conquerors through Jesus Christ. Had you kept up communion with him in prayer, you would not so long, by drunkenness, have had communion with devils. But, like the Prodigal, you have desired to be your own masters; you have lived without prayer, depended on your own strength; and now

see, alas! on what a broken reed you have leaned. How soon have you made yourselves like the beasts that have no understanding? But turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways. Come to him with the repenting Prodigal saying, "Father we have sinned;" we beseech thee, let not this sin of drunkenness have any longer dominion over us. Lay hold on Christ by faith, and lo! It shall happen to you even as you will. A

Second means I would recommend to you, in order to get the better of drunkenness, is to avoid evil company. For it is the evil communication of wicked men, that has drawn many thousands into this sin, and so corrupted their good manners.

But you may say, if I leave my companions, I must expect contempt: for they will certainly despise me for being singular. And thinkest thou, O man, ever to enter in at the strait gate by a true conversion, without being had in derision of them that are round about thee? No; though thou mayst be despised, and not go to heaven, yet thou canst not go to heaven without being despised: "For the friendship of the world is enmity with God." And they that are born after the flesh, will persecute those that are born after the Spirit. Let not, therefore, a servile fear of being despised by a man that shall die, hinder thy turning unto the living God. For what is a little contempt? It is but a vapor which vanisheth away, and cometh not again. Better be derided by a few companions here, than be made ashamed before men and angels hereafter. Better be the song of a few drunkards on earth, than dwell with them, where they will be eternally reproaching and cursing each other in hell. Yet a little while, and they themselves shall praise thy doings, and shall say, We, fools, counted his leaving us to be folly, and his end to be without honor: but how is he numbered among the sons of God, and his lot among the saints!

But I hasten to lay down a

Third means for those who would overcome the sin of drunkenness, to enter upon a life of strict self-denial and mortification: for this kind of sin goeth not forth but by prayer and fasting. It is true, this may seem a difficult task; but then, we must thank ourselves for it; for had we begun sooner, our work would have been the easier. And even now, if you will but strive, the yoke of mortification will grow lighter and lighter every day.

And now, by way of conclusion, I cannot but exhort all persons, high and low, rich and poor, to practice a strict self-denial in eating and drinking. For though “the kingdom of God consists not in meats and drinks,” yet an abstemious use of God's good creatures, greatly promotes the spiritual life. And perhaps there are more destroyed by living in a regular sensuality, than even by the very sin I have been warning you of. I know indeed, that many, who are only almost Christians, and who seek, but do not strive to enter into the kingdom of God, urge a text of scripture to justify their indulgence, saying, that “it is not what entereth into the man defileth the man.” And so we grant, when taken moderately; but then they should consider, that it is possible, nay, it is proved by daily experience, that a person may eat and drink so much as not to hurt his body, and yet do infinite prejudice to his soul: for self-indulgence lulls the soul into a spiritual slumber, as well as direct intemperance; and though the latter may expose us to more contempt among men, yet the former, if continued in, will certainly shut us out from the presence of God. St. Paul knew this full well; and therefore, though he was the spiritual father of thousands, and was near upon finishing his course, yet he says, it was his daily practice to “keep his body under, and bring it into subjection, lest after he had preached to others, he himself should be a cast-away,” or disapproved of, or do something that might make him an offense or stumbling-block to any of God's children: for of his own, and all other saints final perseverance, he makes no doubt, as is evident from many of his epistles; and the word bears this sense, 2 Cor. 13:5 and sundry other places. But why urge I the apostle's example, to excite

you to a strict temperance in eating and drinking? Rather let me exhort you only to put in practice the latter part of the text, to labor to “be filled with the Spirit of God,” and then you will no longer search the scriptures to find arguments for self-indulgence; but you will seal sincerely with yourselves, and eat and drink no more at any time, than what is consistent with the strictest precepts of the gospel. O beg of God, that you may see, how you are fallen in Adam, and the necessity of being renewed, ere you can be happy, by the Spirit of Jesus Christ! Let us beseech him to enlighten us to see the treachery of our corrupt hearts, and how pure and holy these bodies ought to be, that they ought to be living temples of the Holy Ghost, and then we shall show ourselves men. And being made temples of the Holy Ghost, by his dwelling in our bodies here, though after death, worms may destroy them, yet shall they be raised by the same Spirit at the general resurrection of the last day, to be fashioned like unto Christ's glorious body hereafter.

Which God of his infinite mercy grant, &c.