

Sermon & **Bible Study Helps**

LET US PURIFY OURSELVES

Emphasis Passage: 2 Corinthians 7:1

Parallel Translations

King James Version: Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

New King James Version: Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

New International Version: Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

New American Standard Bible: Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Holman Christian Standard Bible: Therefore, dear friends, since we have such promises, we should wash ourselves clean from every impurity of flesh and spirit, making our sanctification complete in the fear of God.

New Living Translation: Because we have these promises, dear friends, let us cleanse ourselves from everything that can defile our body or spirit. And let us work toward complete purity because we fear God.

New Jerusalem Bible: Since these promises have been made to us, my dear friends, we should wash ourselves clean of everything that pollutes either body or spirit, bringing our sanctification to completion in the fear of God.

Greek Text

ταύτας ουν ἔχοντες τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀγαπητοί, καθαρῖσωμεν ἑαυτοὺς ἀπὸ παντὸς
Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all

μολυσμοῦ σαρκὸς καὶ πνεύματος, ἐπιτελοῦντες ἀγιωσύνην ἐν φόβῳ θεοῦ.
defilment of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

KEY WORDS (WITH STRONG'S REFERENCE NUMBERS)

καθαρίσωμεν (katharisōmen) – Verb, aorist, active, subjunctive, 1st person, plural

(2511) καθαρῖζω (katherizō) – cleanse, make clean, purify; declare ritually acceptable

μολυσμοῦ (molusmou) – Noun, genitive, masculine, singular

(3436) μολυσμός (molusmos) – defilement, filthiness, stain, immorality

ἐπιτελοῦντες (epitelountes) – Participle, present, active, nominative, masculine, plural

(2005) ἐπιτελέω (epiteleō) – complete, accomplish; finish, end; perform (of duty)

CONTEXT

Prior to writing Second Corinthians, Paul had written to the church at Corinth to instruct them about how to deal with a serious problem in the church (2 Cor. 2:1-10). Apparently, Paul's involvement was not well received by everyone, and the conflict that resulted strained Paul's relationship with the church (2 Cor. 1:12-24, 6:12, 7:2). Paul wrote Second Corinthians in an attempt to restore his relationship with the church in Corinth.

Second Corinthians 7:1 is part of the first section of this letter. In this section, Paul relates his partnership in the gospel with the Corinthian Christians (2 Cor. 1:3-11), his role in this partnership (2 Cor. 2:12-4:6), and his sufferings on behalf of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:7-6:10). Following this groundwork, Paul reminds these Christians that they are bound together as family in God (2 Cor. 6:14-18), and that they must not let anything defile them and cause division between them (2 Cor. 7:1-2).

SERMON AND BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Introduction

Few things have more potential to rob people of their opportunities to excel in life than alcohol and illicit drugs. These dangerous substances interfere with every area of life—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. For a significant percentage of people, these substances are devastating. They rob some of their ability to perform many of life's basic functions. Many have had their lives completely destroyed. Still others have suffered early and often tragic deaths because of alcohol and illicit drugs.

The Apostle Paul was so certain that alcohol was a dangerous substance that he included instructions about its use in many of his letters to the churches and its leaders. In addition to direct instructions about alcohol use, Paul also often gave general counsel in his writings that apply to a wide range of behaviors, including the use of alcohol and illicit substances. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians contains three compelling reasons for abstaining from their use.

I. We should abstain from using alcohol and illicit substances because of our relationship to God.

Paul introduced his call for purity by reminding the Corinthian Christians of certain promises God has made to His people (2 Cor. 6:16-18). These promises suggest a number of reasons why Christians should avoid inappropriate behavior, which includes the use of alcohol and illicit drugs. First, by referring to these promises Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that God is not some abstract principle or impersonal being. He is a living and personal God who has committed Himself to indwell His people and to walk with them. He is their constant companion through all of life. Such constant companionship should cause believers to act in an appropriate manner.

Second, the familial relationship that exists between God and His people (2 Cor. 6:18) should influence one's decision about the use alcohol and illicit drugs for two reasons. For one thing, this relationship imposes certain responsibilities on both parties. A father is responsible for the protection and provision of his children. The children are responsible to obey their father and to live in a way that honors him. In addition, this relationship reminds believers of an even more fundamental reason to avoid the use of alcohol and illicit drugs—love. Love is the glue that binds a

father and his children together and that motivates them to fulfill their responsibilities to each other faithfully. This love should compel behavior that strengthens the relationship rather than weakens it. Because of its destructive power, substance abuse is certain to interfere with and weaken the relationship between God and His people.

Third, Paul's reminder that Christians are God's children is a reminder of their salvation. No one is born into this world as a child of God. Out of His love for humanity, God provided a way for sinful human beings to enter into a relationship with Him. John clarifies that people become the children of God by receiving Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sin that He offers (Jn. 1:12). The expression of such love by God should motivate Christians even more to want to please their heavenly Father in all things.

II. We should abstain from using alcohol and illicit substances because of God's requirement of holiness.

The Christian's response to God's promises should be a commitment to holiness. Paul defines what he means by "holiness" in this verse by contrasting it with "defilement." The word "defilement" is used in a figurative sense in the Bible to refer to something or someone that is tainted or stained in a moral or religious sense. It often connotes something that is unacceptable for spiritual purposes. Paul does not want his readers to be defiled, and therefore unacceptable for service to God. Instead, he wants them to be holy. In the same way that an undefiled vessel could be put to use by the priest, so a Christian whose life is undefiled by sin, can be put to use by God.

Though he wants his readers to be holy, Paul does not command this purification. He uses a hortatory subjunctive ("let us") to call his readers to this decision. When God saved them, He cleansed them from the guilt of their sin. Now it is their responsibility to keep themselves free from the defilement of sin so God can work in and through them. Paul wants his readers to make this choice willingly rather than in compliance with a command.

The holiness that Paul calls for is not some superficial, casual dusting of believers' lives, but a determined act of purification that removes the defilement entirely. The verb "cleanse" means to remove in such a way that real change takes place. The English word "catharsis" is a transliteration of the noun form of this word. R. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, p. 1091, comments that Paul's use of the aorist form of this word means that he intends that they engage in a "cleansing that actually cleanses." Furthermore, Paul does not imagine a single cleansing. He "enjoins a constant cleansing, a working at it all the time," because the Christian's life is constantly being defiled by sin.

Paul is concerned about defilement in every aspect of the believer's life. His phrase "flesh and spirit" encompasses every part of the Christian life, both deed and thought. There is no part of the Christian life that should be left unexamined and then thoroughly cleansed. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, p. 238, comments that Paul is talking about "all sorts of filthiness, physical, moral, mental, ceremonial." Additionally he observes that Paul's use of the present tense of *epiteleo* ("perfecting") is an "aggressive and progressive holiness, not a sudden attainment of complete holiness, but a continual process." The progress toward holiness is never complete. Therefore, the Christian can never stop ridding his life of all that defiles him. Considering the many ways in which alcohol and illicit drugs hinder people's effectiveness, it is certainly understandable that a Christian who desires to live a pure life would abstain from the use of these substances.

III. We should abstain from using alcohol and illicit substances because of our accountability for God.

The Christian's responsibility to cleanse his life from all defilement is further motivated by his reverence (*phoba*) for God. The English word "phobia" comes from this Greek word. In the New Testament the word has a broader range of meanings than it does today, however. It is probable that Paul has the entire range in mind here as he seeks to motivate his readers to perfect their holiness. P. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 258, sums up the range of meaning very effectively. He comments that the activity of cleansing should be conducted (1) in reverence and devotion towards Him to whom we owe everything, (2) in awe of Him at whose judgment-seat we shall have to give an account of the things done in the body (2 Cor. 5:10ff), and (3) in dread lest, through carelessness and disloyalty, we should be ashamed before Christ at His coming (1 Jn. 2:28).

A Christian who is considering whether or not to use alcohol or illicit drugs must take all of these meanings into consideration. His use of these substances will certainly interfere with his devotion to God. They will also hinder his ability to do his very best for God, and under the Lord's scrutiny these failings will undoubtedly result in great shame.

Conclusion

Defilement in a Christian's life can come from many sources. When one considers the destructive force of alcohol and illicit substances, it is certain that a Christian who desires to keep his life free from defilement would be wise to abstain from their use. Second Corinthians 7:1 provides strong motivation for such a decision. This passage reminds the believer that his life is not lived in isolation from God. God is an ever-present participant in and observer of every Christian's life. This closeness of God provides the Christian with both a positive and negative motivation for keeping his life free from substance abuse. He should keep his life free from these dangerous substances in response to God's love for him as His Heavenly Father and in response to his understanding that one day he will give an account of his life to God.

WHAT CAN ONE PERSON DO?

- Decide to abstain from the use of alcohol and illicit drugs.
- Begin an alcohol and drug rehabilitation ministry in your church.
- Ask your pastor to make substance abuse awareness a regular part of the church's message.
- Teach a Bible study on substance abuse to help others become more aware of the Bible's teachings on substance abuse.
- Encourage public officials to pass laws and to enforce laws that discourage the use of alcohol and illicit drugs.
- Write letters to the editor stating your position on alcohol and illicit drugs and your reasons for it.

HELPFUL SCRIPTURE

Bible verses about the sanctity of human life

Genesis 9:21-24; Leviticus 10:8-9; Proverbs 20:1; Proverbs 21:17; Proverbs 23:20-21, 29-35; Proverbs 31:4-7; Isaiah 5:11, 22; Isaiah 28:7-8; Isaiah 56:12; Hosea 4:11; Hosea 7:5,14; Joel 3:3; Habakkuk 2:15-16; Nahum 1:10; Luke 12:44-46; Luke 21:34; Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 6:12, 19-20; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:7-8,22; 1 Timothy 3:3,8; 1 Timothy 5:23; Titus 1:7; Titus 2:3; 1 Peter 2:16; 2 Peter 2:19

SUGGESTED BIBLE STUDY QUESTIONS

This is a suggested Bible study for any size group. The sermon notes on this sheet, the accompanying fact sheet, and the enclosed materials serve as resources as you prepare to teach and then lead this Bible study. Answers are provided with the questions when appropriate, but do not be too quick to give the answers. Allow the participants time to talk about the questions among themselves and offer their own answers.

Create Learning Readiness: Share some statistics about substance abuse from the accompanying Fact Sheet.

Ask: Have you ever known of someone whose life was severely affected by substance abuse?

Say: Probably everyone knows someone whose life was hurt by alcohol or illicit drugs. Unfortunately, many people today, both within and outside the church, have made the decision to drink alcohol, and many millions more are using illicit drugs. While there is certainly a difference between alcohol and illicit drugs, and while most people are able to drink alcohol responsibly, the inescapable reality is that every time a person takes a drink or uses an illicit substance, he diminishes his ability to do his best while he is under their influence.

Say: The Bible contains many warnings about alcohol, and of course by association, these would also apply to illicit drugs.

Ask: Can you name some Bible passages that speak about using alcohol?

(Refer to the Helpful Bible Passages section of this guide for a list of passages.)

Say: In addition to direct statements about substance abuse the Bible also supplies many teachings that can guide our decisions about the use of alcohol and illicit drugs. In this Bible study we will discover three reasons in 2 Corinthians 7:1 not to use alcohol and illicit drugs.

Call on a member to read 2 Corinthians 7:1.

Ask: What promises is Paul talking about?

The promises he notes in 2 Cor. 6:16-18.

Ask: Do you notice a theme in these promises?

They speak of relationship to God.

Ask: What kinds of relationships do they describe?

Family.

Ask: In light of these promises, what does Paul call on his readers to do in 2 Cor. 7:1?

Purify themselves.

Ask: How would these promises motivate a person to purify himself?

(Refer to the first point in the Sermon and Bible Study Notes section of this guide for a discussion of this.)

Say: Obviously, Paul is concerned about purity.

Ask: Is it possible for alcohol and illicit substances to defile a person? How?

They interfere with every area of life and rob people of their ability to excel. The effects of these substances are even more destructive for some people. They rob some of their ability to perform many of life's basic functions. Many have had their lives completely destroyed. Still others have suffered early and often tragic deaths because of alcohol and illicit drugs.

Ask: Instead of defiling ourselves, what does Paul say Christians should be interested in doing?

Perfecting holiness.

Say: The Bible uses the word "holy" in a number of ways. Paul defines what he means by "holiness" in this verse by contrasting it with "defilement." The word "defilement" is used in a figurative sense in the Bible to refer to something or someone that is tainted or stained in a moral or religious sense. It often connotes something that is unacceptable for spiritual purposes. Paul does not want his readers to be defiled, and therefore unacceptable for service to God. Instead, he wants them to be holy. In the same way that an undefiled vessel could be put to use by the priest, so a Christian whose life is undefiled by sin, can be put to use by God.

Say: Instead of making ourselves less available to God, Paul says that Christians should "perfect" holiness.

Ask: We know that a person never becomes completely holy in all areas of his life, so what do you think Paul is talking about here?

Paul's use of the present tense of *epiteleo* ("perfecting") is an "aggressive and progressive holiness, not a sudden attainment of complete holiness, but a continual process." The progress toward holiness is never complete. Therefore, the Christian can never stop ridding his life of all that defiles him.

Say: Paul also says why Christians should be perfecting their holiness. He says Christians should be doing this "in the fear of God."

Ask: What do you think he means by the term "fear of God"?

The term carries the meanings of reverence, awe, and dread.

Ask: How would this motivate someone to abstain from using alcohol and illicit drugs?

(Refer to the third point in the Sermon and Bible Study Notes section of this guide for a discussion of this.)

Ask: Has this study changed the way you think about alcohol and illicit drugs? What has changed?

Ask: How can we use our new insight to help others?

Say: Those are all good suggestions. Let's try some of them this week and talk about how well they worked when we meet next time.