

Temperate

The Character of a Christian

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Today we continue our series on the character of the Christian. We are exploring how the various character qualifications of elders are actually God's calling on all Christians. While elders are meant to *exemplify* these traits, all Christians are to *exhibit* them. I want us to consider whether we are displaying these traits and to learn together how we can pray to have them in greater measure. Today we will look at what it means for Christian leaders and for all Christians to be temperate and sober rather than drunk or debauched.

Paul tells Timothy, "An overseer must...not [be] a drunkard (1 Timothy 3:2–3). Again, he tells Titus, elders must "not [be] open to the charge of debauchery" and they must not be "a drunkard" (Titus 1:5–7). Why this specific qualification? What is so important about it?

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Alexander Strauch says plainly, "Drunkenness is sin, and persistently drunken people require church discipline. ... So a person in a position of trust and authority over other people can't have a drinking problem." Again, he writes, "If an elder has a drinking problem, he will lead people astray and bring reproach upon the church. His overindulgence will interfere with spiritual growth and service, and it may well lead to more degrading sins." It is worth noting that the Bible does not lay the blame for drunkenness on alcohol itself, but on the one consuming it. Commenting on 1 Timothy 3, John Stott points out that Paul "did not require them to be total abstainers, since Jesus himself changed water into wine and made wine the emblem of his blood. ... What Paul requires, however, is moderation, as an example of the self-mastery already mentioned..."

John Piper widens the passage's implications a little bit when he says, "The general qualification here would be like the one above under temperance, namely, self-control—not addicted to anything harmful or debilitating or worldly. Freedom from enslavements should be so highly prized that no bondage is yielded to." Piper extends the reach of this command from alcohol to any other kind of intoxicant or narcotic—a common and, I believe fair extension of the principle.

As we have seen for each one of these qualifiers, God requires all Christians—not just elders—to pursue the same standards. Paul tells the church at Corinth that they must not associate or eat with "anyone who bears the name of brother" and who is a "drunkard" (1 Corinthians 5:11). Why? Because drunkards (among others) "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Again, Paul says, "those who do such things (like get drunk) will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). Elsewhere, he commands, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). Peter agrees: "The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do (which includes getting drunk)" (1 Peter 4:3).

The Proverbs also warn against drunkenness numerous times and in numerous ways. “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1). “Be not among drunkards or among gluttonous eaters of meat” (Proverbs 23:20). Consider also this passage:

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. “They struck me,” you will say, “but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink.” (Proverbs 23:29–35)

Finally, specific groups of people are also told to be sober. Deacons are held to the following standard: “Deacons likewise must...not [be] addicted to much wine” (1 Timothy 3:8). And again Paul writes, “Older women likewise are...not [to be] slaves to much wine” (Titus 3:3).

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Self-Evaluation

So, how about you? Does your life reflect sobriety and self-control? I encourage you to ask yourself questions like these:

- Do you have a biblically-informed position on whether or not Christians may consume alcohol? Do you abide by your position?
- Are you able to partake of alcohol in moderation and without becoming intoxicated? Would your friends and your family agree?
- Do you find yourself tempted to drink too close to your limit? Do you regularly succumb to the temptation to have “just one more drink”?
- Are there any other substances that you are addicted to? Do you look to alcohol or any other substance for the happiness and satisfaction that only Christ can provide?

Prayer Points

Whether you drink regularly, occasionally, or not at all, I encourage you to consider praying some of these prayers:

- I pray that you would deepen my convictions about alcohol so that I can partake (or not partake) with freedom and confidence. Help me never to violate my conscience, never to pass judgment on others, and never to flaunt my freedom.

- I pray that I would be able to enjoy your gifts without becoming enslaved to them. I pray that you would give me victory over all drunkenness and indulgence. Even if that is an unthinkable temptation right now, I ask that you would help me never to relax my guard but always to be vigilant.
- I pray that you would make me more like Christ who was able to be around alcohol and those who consumed it, but who could not be charged with drunkenness because he never once over-indulged.

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