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The Back to God Hour

THE DENOMINATIONAL ROADCAST OF

THE REFORMfD. ES

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THE CHRISTIAN HANGOVER

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.

Ephesians 5: 18

It's time we stop laughing at drunkards and more people are beginning to think so. Talk about drugs all you want, the fact is, the most abused drug in the world is alcohol.

Dr. Morris E. Chafetz, director of a rather new organization called the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, estimates that there are more than 9 million problem drinkers in America. But, I'm sure, Dr. Chafetz, that if you took a little trip around the world, you would find people like this everywhere. Of course. Every country is troubled by this. As I sat in the train coming into Tokyo some time back a man swung on and grasped the pole in the aisle mightily. He pivoted on his heel and suddenly collapsed beside me. He was very, very polite, but saki had had hold of him. Russia is worried about what vodka is doing to people, and the French wonder how much longer they should encourage wine with breakfast. The Dutch are still downing their firry genever. Swing through South America the day before Lent starts and one will see some problem drinking. And the Australians continue to put more beer away than anybody ... sometimes finishing two or three stiff ones the flight between Canberra and Melbourne.

Problem drinkers-your definition is good as mine. But in general I guess we would have to call anyone a problem drinker who has times he loses control and things happen to him that he nor anybody else wants to happen, but they happen because he has surrendered what in-

telligence he ordinarily possesses to the control of alcohol. The difference between a problem drinker and an alcoholic is rather academic, I suppose. There is a difference between the man who swings out of bed in the morning groping for some of the same stuff that put him to sleep the night before and the man who only gets smashed once a week or once a month. But at the times they are under the influence of alcohol there is no difference between them at all.

I don't have to tell you about the misery that is caused by problem drinking. At first the problem drinker is miserable himself, until his own mind becomes so befuddled he doesn't realize how bad off he is. Then, too, the problem drinker becomes exceptionally skilled at fortifying his habit with an intricate web of excuses and justification that relieves him of some of the acute heartache he would otherwise have. But problem drinking has terrible results for those around the problem drinker.

The husband who wonders how his wife is getting along at home, worried all the time that he is going to find her long gone when he returns could tell you a story about anguish. A wife worrying like that about her husband could tell you. Children who grow up in a home where alcohol has taken over can tell you a story of dismay and revulsion. They see those who should be helping them, staggering and vomiting. And those same children will tell you about the ugly fighting that muddies the atmosphere of their home when their parents are off the bottle but petulant and irritable and nagging because of what drink has done to their lives.

But aside from the social ruin alcohol brings,

reckoned in wrecked homes and marriages, children emotionally mutilated and scarred, there is a great deal of material damage that results as well: traffic fatalities, broken property, aircraft accidents, fires started, unwanted pregnancies. Ask the man who spent six months mending after his pelvis had been shattered by the careen in the car of a happy drunk ... a drunk who really asked to help him from the wrecked one while he asked stupid questions about the dead friend who tumbled amid the golf clubs on the seat beside him ... ask him what drunkenness means in sheer physical torment. He'll tell you. He'll tell you all about it while he drinks a Jack Daniels himself and offers you one.

And this brings us to our problem, the drinking problem, really. It is our curious ambivalence, our continuing hypocrisy with respect to booze, our oddly assorted and contradictory thoughts that dampen men's enthusiasm for quitting once and for all, even though we full well it is good for nothing. The drinking problem is, clearly, not you think, essentially this: we know how much damage it can do, but we still like to drink. I say we ... that's all of us in our society. Some of us don't drink at all, I know. But all of us together still like it.

The curious love-hate relationship men have with alcohol is demonstrated in another way that described a series of television commercials that, supposedly, will help men see the seriousness of the problem. Dr. Chafetz, whom we talked about at the commercial on the road, and they are some of the first attempts to get people off the bottle, just as the television ads tend to get people off cigarette time ago, and succeeded at least in getting cigarette ads off

television. Anyway, the article described the great jobs the ads will do, and then it rather jubilantly went on to announce the merger of a couple of big name brewing corporations.

One would think the article would have softened the good news that a couple of breweries were making plans to do a better job of marketing. But no. And this demonstrates our attitude toward alcohol. There can be times of self-righteous condemnation and then there can be other times when everything about drinking becomes hilarious and fun. Come on, it's got to be one or the other. Drinking can not be at the same time a great national problem and the foundation of a great humanity serving industry and actually very, very funny.

No, let's be frank. Those who are into alcohol feel it serves a very useful purpose. That is, people use it because they get something out of it. It relieves boredom, it eliminates loneliness, it generates happiness, it removes inhibitions, it stimulates conversation, it promotes sociability, it even tastes good, and it makes you sleep well. To this, some people actually believe that it is good for you because they think it stimulates circulation and helps the elderly live longer and healthier. We might as well face it, anything that does all this is a pretty useful commodity, and people aren't going to put it away once and for all. Surely, it does a lot of evil things, too. But people don't use it because of the evil it does, they use it because there are times when they are absolutely convinced that they must use it. Their health depends on it. Their happiness depends on it. Their sanity does.

And, as you know, in addition to all the good things people think alcohol can do for them,

after they are into it, it becomes a habit pure and simple, a habit that for many quickly becomes an addiction. When this happens, those who are involved in drinking too much learn very fast that all the so-called good things they used alcohol for before were just lies and they feel themselves trapped. Their physical make-up and their psychological make-up—all of their personality—is so wrapped up in alcohol that they become hopeless. So that kind of a thing is rather hard to deal with. For the social drinker, let's say, alcohol is, he thinks, a pleasant, useful thing, and for the poor man or woman who is in alcohol's merciless embrace, there's no breaking away.

Now when we deal with a force as potent as this, obviously all the preaching in the world isn't going to help much. When I say preaching, I don't just mean that which is done by ministers, but I mean, too, the pleading and the cajoling that a wife might do with her husband who has the problem or the anguished discussion a husband may have with his wife who has the problem. I say, it won't help much, because of the way alcohol is pushed because of the way it appears to be so very respectable and because of the relentless grip it is able to maintain on those who are involved in its use.

So what is needed is a substitute of some kind. And right here the Christian faith becomes very interesting and important. I'd like to introduce an idea that you may not have thought of before. It is a contradictory one, but it underscores how the Christian faith can help. It's the idea of the Christian Hangover.

Let me tell you what I mean by that.

In Ephesians 5 there is a very interesting

description of the Christian faith that is related directly to the problem we have been talking about. Listen: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." (vv. 15-20)

Now did you notice how all of what just read centered around the idea that we are not to get drunk with wine, but to be filled with the Spirit? It is striking that God is willing to talk about the Christian faith in such earthy terms. He comes to people who have an alcohol problem and tells them about a substitute way of life that is strong enough to release the grip of the tyrant that now enslaves them. So don't think that God doesn't care about people who are wrestling with the problem of alcohol.

You know, sometimes people who are into this problem begin to feel so wretched they give up. They are hopeless. They don't think any one cares for them anymore, and if anyone should suggest that God cares for them, they laugh. "How could He?" they ask. "Why, I neglect my family, I am barely holding my job. I'm not worth anything to anyone. What do you mean, God cares? Well, He does. Other wise right here in the middle of this beautiful book of Ephesians He would never have described the power of the Christian faith the

way He does. But He says very clearly: "I've got something to take the place of wine. Don't be drunk with it, but be filled with the Spirit."

At any rate, what God is talking about here can be understood in terms of the idea the "Christian Hangover." Before Christ, further let me just say that there are two kinds of Christian hangovers. The one kind is the regular alcoholic hangover Christians have the way some Christians feel the morning after the night before. Sometimes they feel the agony of it when they are sitting in church. They are Christians but they have slipped off the road somewhere along the line, and they fall every once in a while into this misery. Maybe they are Christians in name only. Maybe they are really Christians and they are struggling to get out of the trap they are in. In any case, that's a Christian hangover too. And it's not the kind I am talking about;

But there is another "hang-over" that we call Christian, and it is a good one. A hangover is the aftereffect of alcohol. You know; if you are wrestling with the problem, that you can drink and drink just so long, and finally you are going to have to sleep it off. Some thing is going to have to happen so that your body and mind can readjust again. You can not drink alcohol like water. Water you drink and that's the end of it. Alcohol you drink and there is never any end to it. It keeps hold of you. It hangs around. You feel it the next morning. And stay with it long enough and it will destroy your liver.

Well, there is a form of Christianity that doesn't leave you either. It stays with you, and in that sense it is a form of Christianity that leaves a lasting impression in the lives of those

who engage in the usual Christian practices. Now, there are some people who can go to church for years, but everything they hear goes in one ear and out the other. That kind of Christianity has no power, and it can do nothing to help people out of the difficulties they are in.

But there is another kind, too, and Ephesians 5 is talking about that. I hope you noticed when I read from it, that the Christianity described here is a kind that results in a daily walk. Ephesians 5 talks about a Christian walk. (v. 15) It talks about understanding what the will of the Lord is (v. 17) It also talks about the fellowship that Christians can have with one another as they address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and it talks about always and in everything giving thanks in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. (vs. 19, 20)

Now, that kind of Christianity, you see, is not a formal thing, but it is the kind of Christianity that "hangs" around a person's life, to borrow this hangover term, and it ends up affecting everything the person does. And this is what the Bible is referring to. When it says that we must be filled with the Spirit of God and not with the spirit of alcohol. It is this full life that is held up as the great substitute for the debauchery that accompanies the use of alcohol so often.

You know, sometimes one gets the impression that the Christian faith offers a substitute for alcohol that is something like alcohol. Some times there are those who suggest that there is a spiritual experience God offers which is some thing like the experience we get from alcohol. You know, many religions use alcohol and

drunkenness as part of their rituals. And some times people think about religion in those terms, as if it is something that can make one escape the usual feelings in his head and get him off onto a higher, more exciting level. And they think that when the Bible says that we are to be filled with the Spirit, this is a kind of ecstasy.

But Ephesians 5 puts that idea to rest once and for all. The Holy Spirit of the living God can provide people with great power to overcome their problems, also the problem of alcohol, but He does this as they live the Christian life fully. Sometimes people talk about the power of the Holy Spirit as if it is a kind of material power that works on us in somewhat the same way alcohol works on us. But the Holy Spirit is a person. He is the third person of the Trinity. And when people are filled with the Spirit, their minds are open to the truth of God, they become involved in understanding what the will of the Lord is, and they enjoy the fellowship of the people of God.

I want to use the idea of a *Christian hangover*, not because this is such a nice idea, it is rather repulsive as a matter of fact, because it unites two things that seem so contradictory) but I use it because I am speaking to you who know what a hangover is. And I want to understand that there is a form of Christianity, too, that is not dead and formal, but it will stay with you the next day and change everything you do. It will be a "hangover" in the sense that it will be with you in the morning when you get up. And it will stay with you every day. You will have power to resist the devil, to maintain your sobriety.

This is not a substitute for professional attention,

I should add. It may be that you will need the help of your doctor to work your way out of a serious alcohol problem. You may need the help of a facility that is set up to help people with a problem like yours. But no human facility will be sufficient on the long term. You need the Spirit of God. You need the kind of Christianity that is all embracing, that stays with you every moment, and that never lets you be

Ephesians 5, which invites us, indeed commands us to be filled with the Spirit and not with wine, leave no doubt that there is just one way for this to happen. Everything centers around Christ. The Spirit filled life is the Christ centered life. "Always and for every thing give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father." (v.20)

That Christ comes to you right now. He died on Calvary's cross so that all those who believe on Him might be forgiven. He died so that all those who believe in Him might receive His Spirit and experience new life.

If you know what a hangover is, kneel at the cross, confess your sins to Jesus and discover the real, power-filled Christianity that stays with you as they grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior. as they enjoy the richness of Christian fellowship

That kind of Christian faith can rescue you from the alcohol trap. It's a Christianity that stays with you every day.

Prepared for broadcast by Dr. Joel Nederhood,
Radio Minister, Christian Reformed Church.

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3CS	Colac	7.30 p.m.
3SR	Shepparton	8.00 p.m.
3UL	Warragul	7.00 p.m.
3YB	Warrnambool	8.00 p.m.
4KQ	Brisbane	8.30 p.m.
4WK	Warwick	8.00 p.m.
6BY	Bridgetown	9.00 p.m.
6CI	Collie	7.30 p.m.
6MD	Meredin	9.00 p.m.
6TZ	Bunbury	7.30 p.m.
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