

DEPENDENCY AND WISDOM

Proverbs - Selected Verses

How many people are in prison as a result of alcohol or drug abuse related causes? What is the cost of incarceration? When you combine state and local spending on everything from drug-related arrests to prison, the total cost adds up to at least \$51 billion per year. Over a period of the last four decades, American taxpayers have paid out \$1 trillion on the drug war. That doesn't even take into account the cost of the lost potential of what these people could be contributing to the general well-being of society! How did we get into such a mess as a nation?

Even though you are not a person using alcohol or drugs, or violating the law, you can certainly be a victim of an alcohol-related or drug-related crime. In fact, millions of people each year are victims of such crimes, including many young people. Each year, more than 600,000 students between the ages of 18 and 24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking. The use of alcohol by the assailant, victim or both accounts for more than 90% of all violent crime and acquaintance rape/sexual assault on college campuses.

Every day, 36 people die, and approximately 700 are injured, in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. Drinking and drugged driving is the number one cause of death, injury and disability of young people under the age of 21.

Our nation's prison population has exploded beyond capacity. One percent of U.S. citizens are now confined in jail or prison. Most inmates are in prison, at least in large part, because of alcohol and drugs. Nearly 50% of jail and prison inmates are clinically addicted. Imprisonment has little effect on alcohol and drug abuse. Approximately 95% of inmates return to alcohol and drug use after release from prison.

In the oft-quoted words of Jack Swigert aboard Apollo 13, "Houston, we have a problem!" In the Proverbs we can see multifaceted descriptions of the effects of "the problem" of abuse of alcohol (and nowadays, drugs).

Deception – 20:1; 23:19-21

¹Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise. Proverbs 20:1

¹⁹Listen, my son, and be wise, And direct your heart in the way. ²⁰Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; ²¹For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe one with rags. Proverbs 23:19-21

In a culture in which wine production was a common activity and the use of wine was wide spread, the possibility of misuse was an issue that parents needed to discuss with their children. Less common than wine (fermented grapes) was the production of beer (fermented grain). Typical alcohol content of these products was 10 percent or less with the maximum being around 20 percent. Distilled spirits with an alcohol content of around 60 percent were not even available during this time. This was thought to have first been used in Asia around 800 BC. Also, there is no mention in the Proverbs of anyone using other intoxicants such as marijuana, khat, cocaine, amphetamines, or any number of powerful mind-altering chemical substances that are available in the world today. Whatever warnings we find for alcohol, we can multiply by a factor of ten or more for all these other substances of abuse.

Just as wisdom and folly were personified in other passages in Proverbs, wine and beer were characterized with "persons" of degraded behavior. A mocker is a person who ridicules another in a hurtful way for the purpose of damaging their influence. We see this all the time in the political arena. The typical tactic is to get a person to make a comment on an issue with a pretext of wanting to know their opinion, and then twist their words out of context and make the

person to appear to be a fool. In the same way, wine is thought by many to be an enhancement to a meal and helps with the socialization of a gathering of people. In the same way that a mocker sets up a person to be ridiculed, the influence of the alcohol in the wine can suddenly produce behaviors that cause a normally rational person to do or say something foolish.

The higher alcohol content of beer (strong drink) can turn a person into someone who will engage in hostile behavior and wind up assaulting another person. It is not surprising for us to learn of a murder reported in the local news that the people involved had been “drinking.”

The conclusion is that it is not very smart (wise) to become intoxicated by wine or beer. The root cause of the problem is lack of discipline or control of what and how much a person will allow himself or herself to consume of anything that has the potential to take control of what we think, say and do. The absolutely safe amount is zero. How much above zero is OK? I do not know. I do know that I would not be talking with a person who had the reputation of getting someone to express an opinion so they could misinterpret what I said so that he or she could make me look foolish. I would not be associating with a person who had a reputation of getting into fights that might cause me to get involved and be harmed or that I might harm someone else.

What is the preventive action to avoid such deception? The first part of the answer is the oft-repeated advice to listen to or heed the wise teaching of parents. This assumes that the parents are actually teaching the right advice for the young person to conduct his or her life in harmony with the principles of the “way.” Of course, the “way” is understood to be the Lord’s way of following the precepts and commandments and principles of God as revealed in the Scriptures.

The second part of “how to avoid” the deception is to stay away from people who are not disciplined in their behavior. Choose your friends and associates wisely. It is fairly common in many areas and professions that those who work together will socialize together by going out after work to a bar or lounge for “happy hour.” It is thought that such socializing will help build rapport with your peers and many feel pressure to participate. My observation is that by engaging in such behavior a person will remain a peer, but the objective should be to rise above the status of peer and become a leader.

Destruction – 23:29-30

²⁹Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? ³⁰Those who linger long over wine, Those who go to taste mixed wine. Proverbs 23:29-30

One consequence of undisciplined consumption of things that can hurt us mentally or physically is that it leads to poverty. There are people who spend the money they have on booze and cigarettes or marijuana or something worse and their families suffer from lack of food and adequate clothing and shelter. This even happens for those who are recipients of government assistance payments that should be used only for food.

We started out looking at the cost to society of the abuse of alcohol, drugs, and other chemical substances in taxpayer money. These costs do not address the emotional costs to the person who is a substance abuser and the even larger emotional costs to family and associates and victims. The writer of Proverbs used various terms to describe these emotional costs. The first is woe, the second is sorrow, followed by contentions and complaining. There is also a spill over that can effect a person physically described as wounds and bloodshot eyes.

How many times have we observed that people who drink “too much” or those who use stronger mind-altering and physical-altering substance must be miserable? That is the idea of “woe and sorrow.” It is bad enough that the user (abuser) is affected. It is tragic when a spouse and children are impacted by this same misery. It doesn’t even stop there. If the person has a

job, then the employer and fellow workers are impacted. Sometimes those who are totally un-associated with the person are literally impacted by the automobile the user was driving. It would amaze us to realize the ripple effect of one substance abuser on other people. It should be clear that some sort of intervention is desperately needed. The kind of intervention we are using is not working. This situation is one of the strongest arguments in support of the idea that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

Going beyond emotional impact of misery (woe and sorrow) that is experienced by so many people, we see that interactions with others are influenced by the person who is impaired when they are contentious and complaining.

We all likely find it disturbing that we and others tend to dismiss bad and harmful behavior with the excuse that the person was drunk or high on drugs and somehow the actions are not as serious as if the person were sober. I guess the thinking is that if the person is drunk, then they can't help what they do and they would probably make better decisions if they were not “stoned” out of their mind. This shows us that some decisions have serious unintended consequence and the time to make the choice is before control is lost.

While wounds and redness of eyes are immediate consequences of abuse of alcohol, the long-term consequences of major damage to a person's health are much more serious and represent an even higher cost to those who are stuck with the medical bills. This is just another aspect of the ripple effect of how many people and things are influenced by alcohol and drug abuse. In this case, intervention after the fact is too little, too late – the damage is done.

Addiction – 23:31-35

³¹ Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it goes down smoothly; ³² At the last it bites like a serpent And stings like a viper. ³³ Your eyes will see strange things And your mind will utter perverse things. ³⁴ And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea, Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast. ³⁵ “They struck me, *but* I did not become ill; They beat me, *but* I did not know *it*. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink.” Proverbs 23:31-35

A sure sign of addiction is when we know that something will destroy us and yet we do it anyway. How can we avoid addiction? The solution we find in 23:31 is fairly simple. Do not even look at such things. If you don't take the first drink, then you will never become an alcoholic. This advice also works perfectly with marijuana, amphetamines, nicotine, and whatever is addictive and is not essential to sustaining life.

We should have been dismayed with the statistic that one percent of everyone in our nation is in prison or jail. How does 10 percent of the population being addicted to alcohol strike us? We should be horrified. We should even be terrified when it comes to risking our lives in driving on the nation's highways and streets.

The writer of Proverbs mentioned some of the more severe effects of overuse of alcohol such as hallucinations and weird thoughts. I wonder what he would have said about the effects of LSD which is in another league with regard to altering a person's mind. We have found ways to make the detrimental effects even worse over the thousands of years since the Proverbs were written. People can become so “out of their minds” that they cannot remember what they did or what happened to them. They literally didn't feel a thing. They may have murdered someone and not have any memory of what they did. Even after suffering the consequences of their harmful behavior, they find that they “didn't learn a thing” and they will return to the same substances that nearly killed them or someone else. The statistics mentioned earlier was that “approximately 95% of inmates return to alcohol and drug use after release from prison.” Did we mention that we have a problem?

Distraction – 31:4-5

⁴ It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink, ⁵ For they will drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Proverbs 31:4-5

It is helpful to do a little analysis regarding the person being addressed in these verses. No other mention of a king named Lemuel is found in the Scriptures. The word in the Hebrew is a combination of two words “lemo” and “el.” The first part is usually used as a prepositional part of a word and it similar to the English word “for.” The Hebrew word “el” is a shortened form of Elohim which is a common reference to God or other divine beings. Instead of this being the “given name” of a person, we might consider it to simply be the description of anyone to whom such advice would be helpful. If we take this approach, it is not difficult to make the argument that the advice is for those who are set apart for God. In the New Testament we would call someone set apart for God a “saint.” While we may not be able to claim to be a “king” we should certainly consider ourselves to a child of the King. Another consideration is that the word “king” or “ruler” is simply a reference to those of noble character or people of influence.

We might have had some difficulty relating to people who are deceived, destroyed, and addicted to alcohol and drugs, since we are not generally disposed to getting involved in such things. As Christians we bear a great responsibility for proper conduct that comes from “who we are” and “Who we represent.”

Depending on the culture in which we live, the use of alcohol by a Christian can create a distraction from his or her witness. Even in a culture where “a little wine” or “an occasional beer” is not a big deal, the possibility of having a “little too much” can create a very negative impression and may even result in inappropriate actions that would be harmful to the cause of Christ. If there is ever any question of how much is “too much” then the best option is to draw the line at the edge and allow no chance of things that are addictive to gain a foothold in our lives.

Relief or Dependency? – 31:6-7

⁶ Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter. ⁷ Let him drink and forget his poverty And remember his trouble no more. Proverbs 31:6-7 (NASB95)

Some people have situations develop in their lives where they experience excruciating pain and need something to provide relief. Many of these pain relievers can be addicting and you may even know someone who is dependent on morphine-like drugs to cope with the pain. While we can argue that it is better to not get addicted, there are situations where there is a legitimate use of chemical substances to dull the pain.

Others who are the end of life and have such pain associated with cancer or other diseases should see the opiates as “relief” and not be concerned about dependency. If they are near death and they become dependent on oxycodone – what difference does it make?

Exercising wisdom in such areas of our lives will save us from sorrow and woe and can also provide us the guidance to use to be a good ambassador for Christ and, when needed, can help us cope with difficulties associated with physical pain that sometimes comes with our humanity.