

4

WHEN SUBSTANCES TAKE OVER



What's the wildest, craziest thing you've considered trying?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

Only God's Holy Spirit should dictate our thoughts and actions.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

It takes true dedication to do what some people do.

- ▶ Ride a bicycle with only one gear three thousand miles across America.
- ▶ Hike all 2,200 miles of the Appalachian Trail.
- ▶ Climb the 29,029 feet of Mount Everest.

While we marvel at the skill and endurance such people display, let's remember one key factor: none of them did it alone. Only the most foolhardy would attempt an extreme sport without a support team. And, of course, they need special gear to accomplish these endeavors. We don't face life alone either. In spite of our American ideal of self-reliance, we can't go it alone. Unfortunately, too many people try to endure the rigors of life by relying on alcohol and drugs. Such reliance, though, can lead to drunkenness and addiction.

God has a better plan. When we rely on God—the presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives—the path we walk is both rich and joyous. Living under the power of God is the best adventure possible.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Ephesians 5:15-17

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

God's plan is for us to have abundant lives. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). We experience His abundance as we walk with Him.

In Ephesians 5:8, the apostle Paul wrote, "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." In verse 15, Paul urged those of us who have been called out of darkness not to live foolishly, but to "look carefully" to our conduct. In other words, he called us to live wisely.

For Paul, living wisely meant understanding what we do with our time never has a neutral value. We can use our time to work for good, or we can use our time to produce evil. Since evil and sin are all around us all the time, our choices become even more urgent concerning how we spend our time.

Paul didn't want his readers to be foolish; rather, he wanted them to understand the Lord's will—"try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord" (v. 10)—and adopt the same priorities in their lives. Those who are wise invest their energy and effort in what really matters, based on God's agenda. Those who are foolish waste precious time by focusing on things that will vaporize in the scope of eternity.

The way to be wise is by understanding "what the will of the Lord is." The clearest way to know God's will is through Scripture. As we consistently and daily get into God's Word—reading, hearing, studying, and meditating on it—we discover His will.

How would you describe the difference between wise and foolish living?

QUESTION #2

Scripture is clear regarding God's will for our salvation and character: *how* we live. The specifics of *where* we live are not necessarily spelled out in God's Word. But we still can discover His leading on matters of life like marriage, jobs, or education, for example. As we get into God's Word and are sensitive to His leadership, His Holy Spirit speaks to us. He often uses circumstances and other believers to give us direction, but that direction is always in line with His Word.

Ephesians 5:18

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

After telling us in verse 17 to understand the Lord's will, Paul gave us two clear commands regarding God's will.

1. Don't get drunk with wine (alcohol).
2. Be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Those two commands are polar opposites, but both have to do with who or what we allow to control us. The problem with wine, indeed, with all alcohol and substances, is that they dull our senses. We're no longer in control, the substance is. When a person is under the influence, he is neither making the most of his time nor living wisely.

Paul was not addressing addictions, although the command applies to addictions as well. Many people are not alcoholics; in fact, they may not drink alcohol for days or weeks at a time. But they may occasionally get drunk with friends on a Friday night. Frequency is not the issue; the problem is with who or what is in control.

Instead of being controlled by alcohol or some other substance, we are to be controlled by God's Spirit. But although we are under His control, we are never "out of control." In fact, quite the opposite occurs. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be self-controlled.

What are some other things that control people in our culture?

QUESTION #3

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

There are many things that seek to control or influence people in life. List some of the destructive results of these substances in the first column; then list effects of the Spirit-controlled mind in the second column.

The substance-controlled mind:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

The Spirit-controlled mind:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Surrender yourself in prayer to God's Holy Spirit, yielding to His control in each area of your life.

"A Christian is held captive by anything that hinders the abundant and effective Spirit-filled life God planned for him or her!"

—BETH MOORE

When substances take over, a person is led into “debauchery.” The Greek word Paul used captures the idea of something unhealthy. By contrast, consider the benefits of living under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit:

- ▶ “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13).
- ▶ “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23).
- ▶ “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1:7).

To “be filled” with the Spirit is to be controlled and empowered by Him—but it’s not a one-time event. The verb suggests continuous action. It really means to “go on being filled,” indicating a daily process of submission to the Spirit. Just as Jesus said His followers must deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him (see Luke 9:23), we must daily surrender control of our lives to the Spirit.

We each must decide: Who or what will I let influence my thinking and actions? Ephesians 5:18 makes it clear: we are to be continually “filled with the Spirit.” If we are tempted to indulge in anything we know is foolish or reckless, we can lean on the Spirit, praying for His strength to lead a life that pleases Christ instead.



Ephesians 5:19-21

¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul began chapter 5 with an emphasis on walking. Then he called us to live—to walk—with wisdom. (See v. 15.) We are able to do this as the Spirit of God fills us. (See v. 18.) In verses 19-21, Paul described how the Holy Spirit influences the lives of believers.

- ▶ **Our words.** When it comes to indulging in alcohol or substances, friends easily influence each other. With a simple word, one friend invites another to “just have one drink.” If we have friends who encourage such behavior—even enabling those who struggle with addiction—then we would be wise to reconsider those with whom we spend time with and allow to influence us.
- ▶ **Our attitude.** We are to give thanks (1) “always” and (2) “for everything.” As we grow in Christ, letting His Spirit lead us, we see life from His perspective. We have so much to be thankful for! We can “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thess. 5:18), even when we face challenges and difficulties. Thankfulness helps us overcome feelings that otherwise might drive us to alcohol or substances.
- ▶ **Our actions.** We are to relate to one another with a submissive attitude. All Christians should practice submission, but we all know it can be tempting to place conditions on our actions based on the actions of others. It’s easy for us to say, “I’ll submit when she submits” or “I’ll sacrifice after he sacrifices.” However, we are called to set aside our “rights” for the sake of others.

Lest we think submission is beneath us, submission is the very thing Christ did for us. (See Phil. 2:5-11.) We’re not responsible for the way others behave nor do we have control over the way other people act or react. But we’re responsible for the way we behave, and we do have control over our own actions. We can take the first steps in obedience to Christ by submitting control of our lives to His Spirit.

In what ways does thankful living help us in our relationships with others?

QUESTION #4

How can our group better model these verses for others?

QUESTION #5

LIVE IT OUT

Walking under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit is far better than anything we could dream for ourselves. How will you apply this truth this week?

- ▶ **Confess.** Ask the Lord to reveal to you things in your life that are holding you captive. Pay attention to the things you turn to for comfort. Confess any substance abuse to the Lord and ask Him to set you free.
- ▶ **Discover.** If you need specific direction in your life, seek to discover God's will. Commit to spending time daily reading God's Word to understand His plan. Pray and seek the counsel of others as well.
- ▶ **Lean on others.** Surround yourself with people who will help you walk in the Spirit. Ask them to keep you accountable and to encourage you.

There are many ways to live a life of adventure. Some are fraught with dangers and filled with pain. God offers a better way, a path of adventure guided by His Holy Spirit.

My thoughts

