



Recreational Marijuana and the Gospel

On April 1, a new law went into effect legalizing possession of marijuana in New York State. This will eventually expand to commercial sale and home growing of cannabis.

Smoking pot is no longer a crime here. So is it good? St. Paul tells us we should take a careful measure of our freedom: "All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything." (1 Cor. 6)

We continue to say, with the long tradition of the church, that recreational use of psychoactive drugs is not in line with being a disciple of Jesus. Smoking weed is not helpful along that path, and actually works against it.

The Path Toward Life's Goal

The Westminster Catechism asks the question, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." That's the purpose of our lives. We are also sinners being redeemed by God, so our life in Christ is marked by several values that lead us into that glory:

1. **"Since we belong to the day, let us be sober."** (1 Thessalonians 5) We have a sober mind when we think clearly and accurately about our lives. Being drunk or high hurts your moral reasoning and makes you less mature.
2. **"Stay awake."** (Mark 13) Jesus warns us of distractions and a loss of focus that are like falling asleep. Proper conscious attention makes us aware of temptation, including the temptation to become spiritually numb or apathetic.
3. **"Be self-controlled."** (Titus 2) The mark of a spiritually mature person is to be in full possession of your faculties.
4. **"Have the eyes of your heart enlightened."** (Ephesians 1) The New Testament frequently talks about conversion like seeing reality for the first time. Getting high re-immerses a person into a false, chemically induced reality.
5. **"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope."** (Romans 5) This is not an easy one, but patient endurance through difficulty is the greatest teacher of moral maturity that God gives us. We should note the regress when we use escapist drugs rather than walk through the difficult problems in our lives.

I am not here dealing with medical use of marijuana for chronic pain, or the arguments about its addictiveness or health problems. I allow the medical literature to say whatever it finds there. What science cannot answer is whether a potentially safe use of pot is good for me as a person, and as a follower of Jesus.

The Intoxication of the Saints

Finally, I point you to a counterexample: the religious ecstasies of great Christian mystics. I'm thinking of Theresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Brother Lawrence, St. Paul, or many others. They reported intense experiences of God that we would call psychoactive – something was changing in their brains. They felt like they were actually seeing God, or feeling his glory.

But read their stories more deeply. That experience was preceded by a long path of fasting, self-denial, and taming the distractions of the flesh. They labored through hard nights of unanswered prayer. They were persecuted. They did not reach their moment of glory through shortcuts. They were always attentive to consciously give their whole selves into God's purposes. And they knew that even those good spiritual experiences will be overwhelmed by the great ecstasy that we still await, at the redemption of our bodies: seeing God face to face.

Postscript: Alcohol and Gray Areas

What do these points mean for our use of alcohol?

A lot. Being drunk is a problem for all the issues listed above. Now, we do condone a limited use of alcohol that is not "drunkenness." And I recognize that even small amounts of alcohol impact our brain chemistry. This moderate use "maketh glad the heart of man," as in the old King James Version of Psalm 104. But a single blunt typically puts a person into an inebriation, and very quickly, unlike a glass or two of wine among friends.

It's true there's not always a clear line here. On the side of alcohol, that means we should stay on the side of caution – be accountable to others in our use of it, drink less than you would perhaps like, and engage in seasons where you don't drink at all, such as Advent and Lent. On the side of marijuana, maybe some small doses aren't exactly "getting high," perhaps such as in marijuana edibles. Without a doubt, these gray areas exist or will soon multiply. And without a doubt, stepping into those gray areas will create a temptation toward greater use.

The Scriptures do give us examples of saints – yes, our Lord Jesus himself! – who were able to drink alcohol socially and even sacramentally, but avoid the drunkenness which is only our destruction and shame. On this cautious path, I suggest following their example with alcohol if you can do so with maturity, and not trying to forge your own moral trail with psychoactive drugs. I fear that the five values above will get out of hand in your life, and you will become yet another consumer of feelings in our culture, rather than what our world really needs: a light shining on a hill.