How Do You Live "Under the Influence"?

~Other Speakers M-R: John MacArthur:

All people like to be happy– to be exhilarated with joy, to feel good, and to be on top of everything. There's nothing wrong with that. God wants joyous, excited, happy, and uplifted people. The problem lies in how happiness is generated. Some people think they'll find it in a liquor bottle or in a narcotic. But neither of those is the Christian's source of joy.

Ephesians 5:18 says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation." Paul doesn't try to prove that drunkenness is incompatible with Christianity, he simply gives the command. Once a person becomes a Christian, he says goodbye to the life he once lived in drunken debauchery– the party life is to have no place in a believer's life.

Now, I know what you're thinking: "John, are you going to lecture me on the evils of alcohol? That's preaching to the choir!" Is it? One study I found said nearly 14 million Americans last year were classified as alcohol abusers or alcoholics– that's about 1 out of every 13 adults. Millions more regularly engage in binge drinking or heavy drinking and over 50 percent of Americans report that one or more of their close relatives have a drinking problem. With figures like that, do you think some of those people might now attend your church? Were you one of those people?

I won't lecture you on the dangers of alcohol– you're no doubt painfully aware of the problem. Drunkenness causes violence, accidents, abuse, and indebtedness, and we pay millions of dollars in tax money to clean up the wreckage. Insobriety exacts a tremendous toll on our society, both directly and indirectly.

The Spirit and the Bottle

So if Christians are not to be drunk with wine, where do they find joy and happiness? The answer is in the second half of Ephesians 5:18: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (emphasis added). Your thrills, your exhilaration, and your happiness should be the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit, not from being filled with wine.

You might be shocked by the language of that verse. It sounds like Paul is saying we should be drunk with the Holy Spirit. In fact, observers of the apostles exuberant behavior at Pentecost mistakenly concluded they had been dipping into the wineskins a little too early in the morning (see Acts 2:1-4, 13-18). But here's the idea: Being filled with the Spirit results in behavior marked by joy, boldness, and a lack of inhibition. Even a mild person can become bold and unafraid when living under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

That sounds like what happens when a person gets drunk, doesn't it? But Paul is actually making a contrast, not a comparison, between wine and the Holy Spirit. Wine controls a person completely and works evil in his heart and life. The Holy Spirit also controls completely, but He empowers you unto true righteousness. The Spirit's influence provides divine fuel for a different, free, uninhibited life lived for God's glory.

Be Filled

You'll notice that Ephesians 5:18 has a positive command: "Be filled with the Spirit." What does that mean? First, let me tell you what that doesn't mean. Being filled with the Spirit doesn't mean to be indwelt with, to be baptized in, or to be sealed by the Holy Spirit.

- Paul never says, "Be indwelt by the Spirit." If you're a Christian, the Spirit already lives in you (1 Cor. 6:19).
- Paul never says, "Be baptized in the Spirit." If you're a Christian, you were baptized in Him at your conversion (1 Cor. 12:13).
- Paul never says, "Be sealed with the Spirit." If you're a Christian, you've already been sealed with the Spirit (Eph. 1:13).

All three events occurred the moment you were saved.

Instead, Paul's command has our sanctification in view. Though it sounds a little odd in English, the Greek verb means "be continually filled" or "be kept filled." He is actually saying, "Be continually letting the Spirit of God-who is already in you–control you." It isn't a second work of grace, a one-time experience, or a step up to a higher level. It is the continual, ongoing experience of the Christian life.

Surrender and Submit

To be filled with the Holy Spirit means you are continually surrendering your will, mind, body, time, talents, and treasures–every area of your life–to His control. The context shows that every realm of your life will be affected when you are filled with the Spirit. Notice how the Spirit-filled person submits to others (5:21–6:9). The Spirit-filled wife submits to her husband. The Spirit-filled husband loves his wife. Spirit-filled children obey their parents. A Spirit-filled father doesn't provoke his children to anger. A Spirit-filled employee works diligently for his employer. A Spirit-filled employer is fair with his employees. All those are manifestations of the Spirit-filled life.

"So," you ask, "is this a 'Let go and let God' kind of thing?" Hardly. Look at Colossians 3:16 for the answer to the question, "How do I surrender?" It says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." The effect of the Word of Christ dwelling in you is an exact parallel to what happens when you are filled with the Spirit (see vv. 16-23). It's all there–singing, submission, love, obedience, gentle parenting, diligence, and fairness. Therefore, being filled with the Spirit is exactly the same thing as letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. As you study God's Word, as it dwells in you richly, your thoughts become saturated with Christ. You become Christ-centered, Christ-conscious at all times–that's what it is to be Spirit-filled.

Attitude Adjustment

We've already looked at the behavior of a Spirit-filled person, but where is the joy I mentioned earlier? Tucked between the command and the change in behavior is a very important comment on the attitudes of a Spirit-filled Christian. Ephesians 5:19-20 says, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God." In those two verses, Paul is looking at the fruit of two attitudes that demonstrate vitality of the Christian life–joy and gratitude.

Joy and gratitude will characterize you when you are under the Holy Spirit's control. Whether public or private, inward or outward, Spirit-induced joy produces singing that comes from the heart. To whom do you sing? You sing "to one another" and "to the Lord." Keep that in mind the next time you sing in church. Your songs should not be a performance–they aren't entertainment. Rather, they should be the sincere testimony of your joy in the Lord. When you express your joy in the Holy Spirit through singing, you bring pleasure to the Lord Himself.

Hand in hand with joy is thanksgiving (cf. 1 Thess. 5:16-18). If ingratitude sours and darkens the soul, gratitude sweetens it and floods it with light. Thanksgiving is more than the act of saying thanks or sending a thank you note–it is an attitude of the heart. Without the attitude, the act is mere hypocrisy.

Spirit-produced joy and gratitude are indomitable. When Jesus said, "Your sorrow will be turned to joy," He used the example of a woman giving birth to a child. Though the pain of childbirth is agonizing, when the child is born, the joy is both unequaled and unstoppable–nothing can drive it away. That's the kind of change the Holy Spirit produces in everyone who lives under His control.

The Spirit-filled life is overflowing with gratitude, joy, right relationships, and good behavior– quite a contrast to those enslaved by alcohol. You may not be seeking your joy in drugs or alcohol, but are you seeking to be filled with the Spirit? His resources are immediately available and He desires to produce new life in you. What are you waiting for?