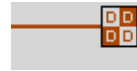




# Ransom Fellowship

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## Did Jesus Smoke?

A Discernment Exercise by **Jeremy Huggins**

I remember three things about the church I attended from 1976-1979. The first involves scary pastor-portraits in the hallway. The second, roller skating to impress a girl named Tina. And the third, the one I can't get out of my head, involves lepers. Every Sunday after church, shuffling behind my family through the parking lot, I saw Them. Always the same ones, huddled in a close circle, their circumference dictated by temperature: the colder the air, the tighter the circle. Always, a pillar of steam rising from their center, regardless of temperature. No one talked to them, and no one went close enough to touch them, taking long-cuts to their station wagons to avoid them. Parents gathered their children in close, slowly folding them into their coats, shutting their eyes to the show. My parents never caught me looking, and, though I waited, terrified and delighted, nothing bad happened to me. I became infatuated with the mystery, and I began looking forward to Sunday. I daydreamed about Them, and, in terms of firing my curiosity, they ranked right up there with reproduction and how could there be so many ramps in Hazzard County.

One morning in Sunday school, Mr. Goode gave us a lesson on lepers; he apologized for not having any felt board characters for us to see. So he sketched a leper colony on the blackboard, and when he moved out of the way, my breath caught, and my lungs began to burn. We had a leper colony outside our church, and my delight in Them was snuffed out. I was afraid.

A few years later, after I read *Where Did I Come From?* and discovered the workings of television car chases, I also realized that those weren't really lepers outside my church—they were smokers. Here was my first lesson in mystery, fear, stigma. I've learned since that the church labels its vices well, and, rather than stepping into sordid circles, we tend to colonize our offenders and rope them off with Bible verses and voices of concern.

The church was/is/will be full of smokers. Some of them are regarded as kings (C.S. Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, R.C. Sproul), some of them are considered "normal" (the regular number outside my church in St. Louis), and some of them are filtered out,

quietly vanishing from the church like wisps of smoke. They have these things in common: they love Jesus, they like to smoke, and they leave themselves open to criticism.

All Christians, truly, are open to criticism; when we become children of God, we also become his representatives—his hands, eyes, ears, mouth. What we do with those hands and mouths must faithfully represent their creator. We are responsible for representing him faithfully, which means we must be open to criticism and be willing to criticize unfaithfulness. We are called to community for this reason. Our criticism must be warm, gentle, winsome, thoughtful; otherwise, unfaithfulness adds to unfaithfulness. Though some criticize smokers warmly and gently, few of us do so winsomely, fewer still thoughtfully.

We see a Christian hold a three-inch cylinder packed with dead leaves, set it on fire and suck on it, and we pronounce "sin." The Christian blows smoke from his mouth, and we back up and say, a bit louder, "Sin." We watch this happen again and again, twenty times per pack, and, without thinking, we cry "SIN," effectively cutting smokers off from meaningful dialogue, from biblical criticism.

Over the last few years, I've been spending time with Christians who smoke, sitting in circles of Christians' smoke. Many of these people have left the church, refugees from rebuke and subtle disregard. Some of them are addicts, some of them are just smokish, but all of them have been treated poorly. And they still smoke, huddling in their circles, cut off from the corporate worship of the living, breathing God.

The church is called to be God's hands and mouth: warm, thoughtful, compassionate. We are called to evaluate our behavior with discernment (prudence rather than prudishness) rather than mere reaction. When we find our knees jerking in reaction, we must question ourselves—the Kingdom does not operate on the basis of jerks.

During my praying, thinking, questioning, interacting, I have yet to find a way to support from Scripture that smoking itself is sinful. Addiction, yes. Under-age smoking, yes. Causing a brother to stumble, yes. Smoking itself, no. This is no black-and-white matter, where we're either Pro-Lung or Pro-Choice. To our lessons in mystery, fear, stigma, let us add discernment.

Last Sunday morning, as the offering plate drew near, my pew-mate confessed that he had spent the few dollars he had set aside for the offering—he ran out of cigarettes Saturday night. The gas station is on the way to church. Cigarettes add up; they can be costly financially and physically. Cigarette smoke offends most people. Secondhand smoke hurts babies. So, is it a sin to spend money on the things we like? To expose our bodies to physical harm? To smell bad? Put another way:

smoking is the leading cause of cancer, and the Fall is the leading cause of sin. So, are cigarettes a result of the Fall? Is smoking a cigarette a sin?

To at least approach an answer, we must examine our hermeneutics: our understanding of Scripture and our application of compassion.

Last month, my roommate asked me to promptly return some videos for him. I told him I would. I did, but not last month. My roommate now has a nasty late fee. Have I sinned? Fundamentally, sin is a transgression of the law of God, a prohibition committed or a command omitted. I searched Scripture, thinking surely that the apostles didn't have time to rent movies. I was right—no specific command to return movies on time, and no specific prohibition against keeping movies too long. While I was at it, I searched and found a similar absence of references to smoking cigarettes. So, are the smoker and movie procrastinator free from sin? (Reader: my intent is not to insult, but carefully to punctuate our agreement.) By this hermeneutic, they have not sinned. But this is a strictly literalistic hermeneutic, and were we to adhere to such, I would be forced to forego my hatred for neo-Nazi hate crimes, as the Bible doesn't address them (and, thus, condemn them) specifically. If smoking isn't denounced on these grounds, then which?

I told my roommate I'd return the videos on time. I had the opportunity, and I didn't. I did not fulfill my commitment, and I acted unfaithfully, both principles that Scripture clearly enunciates. Deprived of specifics, we look for principles. Rightly so. Lacking specifics, then, what principle do most people raise against smoking? This is the part, frankly, where my ashy skin tightens and I strap on my anti-mantra helmet, hoping to avoid the near-inevitable Scripture-grenade: "The body is the temple of the Lord." Plucked from I Corinthians 6, this passage tends to be the champion of those who label smoking sinful. And the principle infusing the passage? That exposing the body to physical harm is a sin. Here is the point of contention.

And here is the point. First, this passage certainly refers to believers and their bodies, but Paul isn't addressing physical harm to the body. I Cor. 6:15-20 describes the believer's body as a figurative temple, the union-house of Christ (6:15) and the vessel of the Holy Spirit (6:19). In this passage, Paul speaks exclusively of sexual immorality. Because of the believer's union with Christ and, thus, his union with other believers, sexual sin, the only sin against the body (6:18), and thus, against this union, affects, mysteriously and differently than other sins, everyone who is united to Christ: the Church. This, the unique peril of sexual immorality, is Paul's contention with Corinth. Certainly, from this passage, we can infer that our bodies are important, possibly moreso than we realize, and we must treat them well, but we cannot, from this passage, conclude that exposing the body to physical (non-sexual) harm is a sin.

Second, supposing that the other 1,188 chapters of Scripture might have something to say, let us grant, for the sake of discernment, the proposed principle that exposing the body to physical harm is a sin. I returned my roommate's movies at 5:15 on a Monday afternoon. St. Louis had just received a carton of snow, and, on the way to the car, I slipped on the ice and bumped my bum. I scraped my knuckles on the door handle trying to de-ice the lock. I almost lost control on Delmar Avenue. On the way home, to soothe my nerves, I picked up some MSG-laden General Tso's Chicken. Once home, I washed the General down with Coca-Cola. Two states away, a dear friend of mine, who labels smoking a sin on the "physical harm" principle, was having his fourth cup of coffee for the day. Two countries away, a missionary was dealing with dysentery. My friend in Los Angeles was breathing smog, and a cab-driving Christian in New York was doing his everyday cab driving in New York. Across town, a Christian was delivering a baby. Even the recluse hypochondriac, who decided to avoid the perils of the world, was experiencing muscular degeneration from sitting on the couch all day. We live in a fallen world, and the only guarantee we have, save the second coming, is that we will die in a fallen world, certainly a physical harm. Truly, some exposure to physical harm is necessary, some of it voluntary, some of it part of calling; in all of these examples, though, physical harm, either actual or potential, is unavoidable, exposing our bodies to harm is inevitable, and it measures itself in degrees. And who of us has the right to legislate degrees? We cannot say, absolutely, generally, or consistently, that exposing the body to physical harm is a sin.

We do not have the right, from Scripture, to see a Christian smoking and, on the basis of the cigarette alone, call his behavior sinful: sin resides in the heart, not in the tobacco. We do have the right to require prudence, and we are obliged to evaluate each other's behavior with discernment.

Smoking can be expensive, offensive, and addictive, and it is mostly not a good idea. But if we make judgments beyond that, we must ask ourselves why. What is the origin of our judgments? Is it Scripture, society, tradition, a mixture of them all?

Of all the things I hoped I would never hear a Christian say, "Kirk Cameron was soooo hot in *Left Behind, The Movie*" tops the list. A close second: "Don't smoke, don't chew, don't go with girls who do." For all of us who had grandmothers who turned snuff into a beautiful art form, let us be grateful that this dictum didn't sway our grandfathers. For my part, I'm not necessarily looking for a girl with a dip-can ring worn into the back pocket of her Wranglers, but I can't, on biblical grounds, rule her out. On cultural grounds, it's worth discussion, but on biblical grounds, no. When we seek to evaluate our behaviors, we must not allow culture to inform our decisions more than Scripture. In India, a smoker is considered a non-Christian; in Holland, an elder; in Mississippi, a backslider; in California, a Republican. How much of our views

on smoking is dictated by culture rather than Scripture?

As we must be critical and discerning of culture (and our own views regarding it), we must be the same with smoking. But we cannot equate critique with prohibition. Much of what we critique (music, film, politics) we also enjoy, and are at liberty to enjoy. We may not be able to parcel out the particulars, to draw the line between degrees, but that is the difficulty, the responsibility, and the privilege of being a discerning people. You may not think it prudent to be a Democrat, or to watch *Magnolia* repeatedly, but can you call it sinful?

I doubt if Jesus smoked or watched *Magnolia*, but I know he engaged in much that was considered culturally sinful. Were he to stand outside one of our churches today, I have no doubt he would gladly engage with the smokers, the modern-day leper colonies. In his own day, lepers were considered culturally unclean, sinful. The Pharisees refused to touch lepers, lest that touch make them unclean in the process. Jesus was born to touch lepers. And in his touching, Jesus' point was that sin resided not in the leprosy itself, but in the heart. Those who stigmatized lepers, especially the Pharisees, were criticizing the form rather than the substance; they were condemning people based on culture rather than Scripture. We cannot make strict parallels between leprosy and smoking, but we become Pharisees when we condemn a smoker on the basis of cultural grounds rather than biblical standards. We must be careful, lest we strain the gnat and swallow the Camel Light.

Jesus, while touching lepers with compassion, extended little to Pharisees. We, too, like the Pharisees, are in danger of becoming selective with our compassion if we allow culture to direct our judgments. Ask yourself: were you on a panel to select a youth worker, the applicants being equally qualified in all other areas, would you be more inclined to hire the smoker or the coffee addict? The shop-aholic? More willing to invite over for dinner the smoker or the Christian struggling with alcoholism? From my experience, the smoker, whether addict or occasional inhaler, receives less patience, compassion, and sympathy than others who "struggle" with a traditional vice. My fear is that the church has become selective with her compassion, and we select based on potential burden. The drug addict, the church member who struggles with pornography, and the alcoholic don't make our clothes stink, don't pollute our air, and our differing treatments reveal that we are often concerned for ourselves more than others: "As long as your smoke, your 'sin,' doesn't get into my fibers, welcome. We touch you in the name of Jesus."

Recently, on my morning walk to the coffee shop, I noticed a button on the ground. I leaned over, picked it up, and wiped off a thin layer of dirt. Underneath, the slogan: Fight Homophobia. I decided to keep the button, proud of my compassion for "sinners," and as I reached to put the button in my satchel, the pin on the back

pricked me, and the thought flashed through my mind: "Those activists planted this thing to give me AIDS." I became aware of two things at that moment: One, I should be careful with buttons. Two, until it became a burden to me, I was glad to practice compassion, but once pricked, I realized the true depth of my concern. If patience, compassion, and understanding aren't coupled with sympathy, the willingness to enter another's world, to get dirty, to smell bad, to hurt personally, then we might as well hang a letter on the necks of sinners and rope them off.

My friend Winston (yes, go ahead, laugh) is a deacon in his church, a gracious husband, and a playful father of three. Every once in a while, after a long week of church meetings and work and dirty diapers, he puts the last whining child to bed, pours two glasses of wine, sits on the deck, and enjoys a cigarette with his wife, the wine and the nicotine making his heart glad.

A friend of mine spends a lot of time sitting inside a coffee shop, writing. After staring at a sentence for 45 minutes, he likes to take a break and sit outside and have a smoke. The coffee shop is near the local university, and almost every time he sits outside and smokes, a student approaches him and asks to "bum a smoke." He obliges, offers a light, and they talk, smoker to smoker, image of God to image of God. And the only reason for the discussion, the spark that ignites it, is that in his smoking, he has created a safe haven, instant hospitality, unabashed freedom from judgment that smokers crave. He is gifted and called to write and to befriend and respect unbelievers; smoking isn't a necessary part of his calling, but it is a valuable one, and, according to Scripture, if he can pack smoking into his calling responsibly (without addiction, e.g.), then he is at liberty to do so.

Is the typical cigarette-smoking Christian addicted? Yes. Must the Christian smoker, addicted or not, be sensitive with his smoke? Yes. Must he be regarded or treated differently than others with behaviors that we don't like? According to Scripture, no. Does this mean our churches are required to build smoking rooms inside our churches so the smokers don't have to shiver outside while everyone else is shaking warm hands? Probably not, though it's worth considering. What is required of the church is that she think through her criticism before stigmatizing people. That she be willing to offer the benefit of the doubt first, and to seek understanding accordingly, before she cast judgments. We have lost many gifted and beautiful saints because of our lack of discernment and biblical thinking on this issue. Regardless of whether fewer or more people are smoking now than last year, or ten years hence compared to now, the church will always have her smokers. Will we continue to make them feel that their "temples of the Lord" aren't as valuable or healthy as the rest, or will we treat them respectfully, winsomely, warmly, thoughtfully? I hope for the latter. I can't quit praying for the latter—I hope to become addicted.

This discernment exercise originally appeared in *Critique* #1 - 2003. Want to receive articles like this on a regular basis? Sign

up for *Critique*.

Jeremy Clive Huggins, 28, says he's a freelance writer/editor/teacher, but his mom hears that and chuckles, as always, at his nice euphemisms. "Call it what you will, honey, but there's nothing wrong with being unemployed, as long as you love what you're doing," she says. In addition to his mother, Jeremy loves his Dodge Dart, likes the color brown, and is obsessed with Franka Potente. If you know her, [e-mail](#) him.

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### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What was your initial or immediate response to this article? Why do you think you responded this way?
2. Go through the piece again and note the key statements, arguments, and reasons that the author uses to make his case. State the author's thesis, as clearly as possible and without editorial comment, in your own words.
3. How have you understood and applied 1 Corinthians 6:15-20 prior to reading this article? Study the passage in detail, taking care to read it in its literary and historical context. Compare your interpretation with that found in several commentaries (choosing at least two which were written in previous periods of history). Did anything surprise you as you examined this text? How has your understanding of the passage been changed or deepened as a result of this study?
4. Do you agree with Huggins' use of the metaphor of "leper" in his discussion of smoking? Why or why not?
5. "All Christians, truly, are open to criticism; when we become children of God, we also become his representatives—his hands, eyes, ears, mouth... We are responsible for representing him faithfully, which means we must be open to criticism and be willing to criticize unfaithfulness... Our criticism must be warm, gentle, winsome, thoughtful; otherwise, unfaithfulness adds to unfaithfulness. Though some criticize smokers warmly and gently, few of us do so winsomely, fewer still thoughtfully." Do you agree? Why or why not? How would you characterize the way you have criticized smokers?
6. "I have yet to find a way to support from Scripture that smoking itself is sinful. Addiction, yes. Under-age smoking, yes. Causing a brother to stumble, yes. Smoking itself, no." Do you agree? If not, what texts would you use to make your case?
7. Why might non-smoking Christians feel threatened or angered by this article? What would you say to them? Should Christian parents try to keep this article from their adolescent children? Why or why not? Should they at least use a magic marker to first blot out a few lines (e.g., "I'm not necessarily looking for a girl with a dip-can ring worn into the back pocket of her Wranglers, but I can't, on biblical grounds, rule her out.")?
8. Huggins writes: "If patience, compassion, and understanding aren't coupled

with sympathy, the willingness to enter another's world, to get dirty, to smell bad, to hurt personally, then we might as well hang a letter on the necks of sinners and rope them off." To what extent is this true of you? Since this is precisely how Jesus acted toward us in the Incarnation, why do we find it difficult to faithfully follow him? Though Huggins uses AIDS as an example here, what specific examples could we list where we fail to live incarnationally?

9. "Jesus, while touching lepers with compassion, extended little to Pharisees. We, too, like the Pharisees, are in danger of becoming selective with our compassion if we allow culture to direct our judgments." To what extent is Phariseeism a problem in the church? A problem in our lives? How would you define Phariseeism? How can we become more sensitive to the problem in our own lives? What other ways does our culture tend to "direct our judgments" and "select our compassion?"
10. Would you be comfortable if your church attracted believers who, before and after each service, congregated on the front steps to smoke? If a church intentionally makes smokers feel unwelcome, what does this imply concerning the gospel it professes? How might a church inadvertently make smokers feel unwelcome?

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### Discussion

Want to wrestle with this discernment exercise within a community of believers? Join our [discussion board](#) (hosted by \*cino) where Christians address issues of all kinds with integrity and grace.

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