

THE BROAD ROAD IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

*False Assurance, Counterfeit Conversion, Normalized Sin,
and the Biblical Marks of Saving Faith*

CHAPTER 8

PLEASURE, APPETITE, AND THE THINGS CHRISTIANS CALL HARMLESS

“Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be mastered by anything.

[1 Corinthians 6:12, CSB](#)

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RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Scripture governs the theological claims in this chapter, with [Matthew 7:13-23](#) as the controlling warning against false assurance. The chapter follows the approved architecture of *The Broad Road in Christian Clothing* and redevelops the author's prior work on worldly pleasure, comfort, hedonistic formation, New Age spirituality, and spiritual attentiveness without mechanically reproducing earlier prose. Current claims concerning alcohol, nicotine and vaping, cannabis, prescription-drug misuse, gambling, gaming disorder, binge-watching, parasocial engagement, obesity, healthy diet, sleep, and psychedelic clinical research were freshly checked against authoritative institutional guidance and peer-reviewed research. Clinical evidence is used descriptively, not as moral revelation. The chapter rejects both ascetic legalism and antinomian permission, distinguishes medical treatment from recreational intoxication, and treats addiction, chronic pain, psychological distress, and sensitive consciences with pastoral care. Time-sensitive claims were last rechecked on 23 August 2026.

Abstract

This chapter examines the moral and spiritual life of pleasure in a culture where appetite is increasingly treated as self-validating and where many practices are defended with the sentence, "It is harmless." Its governing claim is not that pleasure is evil, but that every pleasure must remain a gift under the lordship of Jesus Christ rather than becoming a master, an anesthetic, a substitute savior, or a rival source of identity. Scripture affirms wine, food, feasting, rest, music, celebration, recreation, beauty, friendship, and bodily enjoyment as creaturely goods, while also warning against drunkenness, intoxication, greed, dissipation, gluttony, sloth, occult participation, and every form of enslavement. The chapter therefore rejects both permissiveness and ascetic legalism. It refuses to call every enjoyable practice sin merely because it is pleasurable, and it refuses to call a practice safe merely because Scripture does not name its modern form explicitly.

Using the biblical categories of command, principle, wisdom, conscience, liberty, stewardship, love, and mastery, the chapter evaluates alcohol, nicotine and vaping, cannabis and other recreational drugs, prescription-drug misuse, gambling and sports betting, speculative trading, gaming and streaming, artistic entertainment, occult-themed media and spiritual curiosity, celebrity culture and parasocial desire, food and fasting, sleep and leisure, and the broader problem of good gifts becoming controlling appetites. Contemporary public-health and behavioral evidence is used descriptively where it clarifies dependence, gambling harm, gaming disorder, binge-watching, parasocial engagement, obesity, sleep, and substance-related risk. Medical treatment is carefully distinguished from intoxication, necessary medication from misuse, and clinical research with psychedelics from recreational or spiritualized drug use. New Age, New Thought, manifestation, divination,entheogenic spirituality, and occult experimentation are examined where pleasure and altered consciousness are presented as routes to awakening, guidance, or divine access.

The chapter argues that Christian liberty is not the right to ask how close one may live to enslavement while remaining technically permitted. Christian freedom is freedom to belong to Christ, love the neighbor, discipline appetite, receive created goods with thanksgiving, and surrender any gift that begins to rule the heart. The drunk, smoker, gambler, compulsive gamer, binge-watcher, comfort eater, celebrity-obsessed fan, exhausted workaholic, and fearful legalist are not identical cases and must not be treated with one slogan. Yet all are summoned to the same Savior. Christ alone justifies, abstinence cannot save, and pleasure cannot condemn the repentant believer who comes to Him. At the same time, grace must never be turned into permission for intoxication, bondage, waste, spiritual dullness, or idolatry. The chapter concludes by calling the reader from appetite as authority to Christ as Lord, from false reassurance to sober self-examination, and from temporary pleasure to holy joy, durable freedom, and readiness for His return.

Keywords: Christian liberty; self-control; alcohol; nicotine; cannabis; gambling; gaming; entertainment; occultism; parasocial relationships; gluttony; leisure; addiction; idolatry; biblical discernment

Introduction: "Harmless" Is Not a Biblical Moral Category

Some of the most spiritually dangerous questions are phrased as requests for permission. "Is it a sin to drink one glass?" "Where does the Bible forbid vaping?" "What is wrong with a small bet if I can afford it?" "Is a television series really a spiritual issue?" "Can a Christian play a game with magic in it?" "Is it wrong to follow celebrities?" "Why should food, sleep, or leisure matter if salvation is by grace?" Behind many such questions lies a legitimate concern. Christians must not invent commandments God has not given. The church has done real harm by treating local taboos, denominational preferences, or personal cautions as universal divine law. A person should not be declared unsaved because he drinks coffee,

enjoys a meal, watches a film, plays a game, takes a holiday, sleeps eight hours, or declines another Christian's voluntary abstinence.

But the opposite error is equally dangerous. Modern Christians can make "the Bible does not explicitly forbid it" into a moral escape hatch. That reasoning would leave the church almost defenseless before technologies, substances, commercial systems, and entertainment forms that did not exist in biblical vocabulary. Scripture does not name cigarettes, vaping devices, cannabis concentrates, online casinos, loot boxes, streaming platforms, social-media influencers, algorithmic autoplay, or day-trading applications. It does, however, speak with remarkable depth about sobriety, self-control, greed, stewardship, love, bodily care, watchfulness, idolatry, dissipation, the use of time, the formation of desire, participation in darkness, and the terrible possibility of being mastered by what one first called permissible.

Paul's words to the Corinthians provide a governing lens: "Everything is permissible for me," but not everything is beneficial, and "I will not be mastered by anything" ([1 Corinthians 6:12](#)). A similar slogan reappears in [1 Corinthians 10:23](#), where Paul adds that not everything builds up. These statements do not abolish liberty. They rescue liberty from the shallow definition of liberty as permission. A Christian question is rarely exhausted by "May I?" It also asks: Will this help me love God and neighbor? Does it build up? Does it dull watchfulness? Can I thank God for it without hypocrisy? Is it becoming necessary for emotional stability? Does it damage my body or another person's life? Does it exploit weakness? Does it take more time, money, thought, secrecy, or affection than I can honestly place before Christ? Can I stop?

This is the necessary next step after the preceding chapters. Chapter 6 placed the body under the lordship of Christ. Chapter 7 applied that lordship to sexuality and desire. The present chapter widens the frame to appetite itself: the things we consume, inhale, ingest, watch, wager on, play, follow, crave, and use to change how we feel. Chapter 9 will examine money, luxury, and respectable idolatry more directly, while Chapter 10 will examine the digital formation of attention and authority. Here the focus is narrower and more personal. What happens when a good gift, a lawful freedom, a socially normal practice, or an apparently minor pleasure begins to govern the soul?

The author's earlier work has repeatedly warned that pleasure is not evil in itself but becomes spiritually dangerous when it displaces communion with God, dulls endurance, or turns comfort into a ruling demand (Sangwa, 2024a, 2026a, 2026d). The 2024 essay on worldly pleasures identified entertainment, consumer excess, online distraction, luxury, and bodily gratification as possible competitors with spiritual formation. The later exhortation *When Ease Becomes an Idol* sharpened the distinction: rest is a gift, but comfort can become a rival throne when Christians will obey only where obedience is convenient (Sangwa, 2026a). A still later reflection on what Christians are feeding their souls emphasized that distraction can hollow out watchfulness without requiring formal apostasy (Sangwa, 2026d). Those insights remain important, but this chapter must advance them. Earlier broad warnings cannot substitute for careful moral distinctions, contemporary evidence, or pastoral differentiation between addiction, ordinary enjoyment, illness, weakness, liberty, and rebellion.

That qualification matters because Christians have often committed two symmetrical mistakes. One is the ascetic mistake. It assumes that if something can be abused, faithful Christians should universally avoid it; that severity is safer than liberty; or that deprivation is spiritually superior to gratitude. Paul directly warns against teachings that forbid what God created to be received with thanksgiving ([1 Timothy 4:1-5](#)), and he cautions that severe treatment of the body can have an appearance of wisdom while lacking power against fleshly indulgence ([Colossians 2:20-23](#)). The other is the libertarian mistake. It assumes that if something can be received with thanksgiving, it cannot become an idol; that personal

choice settles the issue; or that grace removes the need for self-denial. Paul answers that error too. Christian freedom is not an opportunity for the flesh but a summons to serve one another through love ([Galatians 5:13](#)), and the fruit of the Spirit includes self-control ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)).

A modern culture organized around frictionless gratification makes this conversation more urgent. The concern does not require a theory of centralized cultural engineering. Markets, platforms, advertisers, social imitation, entertainment design, and ordinary human appetite are sufficient to explain why industries learn to reduce friction between desire and consumption. The author's earlier educational research used the language of hedonistic formation and hidden curriculum to describe how environments can socialize people toward appetite and novelty (Sangwa, 2025). Some of its stronger causal hypotheses require caution and should not be inherited merely because they fit a theological concern. The sounder point is more modest and more defensible: repeated environments teach us what to notice, want, normalize, and expect. A church can be spiritually formed by a culture of instant reward without anyone needing to coordinate the process in secret.

The New Testament's language of self-control is therefore not a primitive hostility to pleasure. It is a doctrine of ordered desire. The Christian can feast because food is not god. The Christian can rest because leisure is not lord. The Christian can enjoy art because entertainment is not revelation. The Christian can take medicine because chemicals are not saviors. The Christian can possess money because money is not identity. The Christian can receive wine, where conscience and wisdom permit, without receiving drunkenness. In each case freedom is visible in the ability to receive a gift without bowing to it and, when love or holiness requires, to lay the gift down.

This also means that addiction and compulsion must be treated with both moral seriousness and clinical humility. A person whose alcohol, nicotine, gambling, gaming, or drug use has become compulsive may need more than a command to "try harder." Dependence can involve neurobiological adaptation, learned cues, withdrawal, mental illness, trauma, social environment, family dynamics, financial stress, and entrenched habits. Treatment, counseling, support groups, medication where appropriate, environmental change, pastoral care, and long-term accountability can be forms of wise stewardship rather than substitutes for repentance. Yet complexity must not be turned into moral vacancy. The language of addiction can describe bondage; it must not become a theology in which no action has agency, no lie requires truth, no theft requires restitution, and no harmed neighbor has a claim on us. Grace dignifies people enough to tell the truth about both suffering and responsibility.

The controlling concern remains false assurance. A person may sincerely say, "This does not affect my salvation," while failing to notice that the issue is not whether abstinence earns salvation but whether a professing disciple is being willingly mastered. Another may say, "I never drink, smoke, gamble, or watch worldly entertainment," and quietly rest in moral superiority. The first turns grace into permission; the second turns restraint into righteousness. Neither has understood the gospel. Christ alone saves sinners. The person who belongs to Him is free to receive good gifts gratefully, free to refuse them without pride, and free to confess when appetite has become a chain. Jesus' own eschatological warning reaches this terrain: He cautions disciples against hearts weighed down by carousing, drunkenness, and the worries of life so that the day of His coming finds them spiritually unready ([Luke 21:34-36](#)). Pleasure and anxiety can differ greatly, yet either can dull watchfulness when it becomes a governing preoccupation.

The questions that follow are therefore not a catalogue for condemning other people. They are mirrors. What do I reach for when I am anxious, lonely, bored, angry, ashamed, or spiritually dry? What pleasure do I protect from examination? What expense do I hide? What habit do I rename as "self-care" because I fear what honesty would require? What activity consumes hours I insist I do not have for

prayer, family, service, sleep, or Scripture? What would make me resent God if He asked me to surrender it? The issue is not whether pleasure exists in my life. The issue is whether pleasure knows its place.

8.1 Christian Liberty and Self-Control

Christian liberty begins with redemption, not autonomy. The believer is free because Christ has released him or her from condemnation, from the tyranny of sin, from human regulations treated as means of justification, and from the fear that acceptance with God must be purchased by religious performance ([Romans 8:1-4](#); [Galatians 5:1](#)). That freedom is precious. It is also frequently misunderstood. The modern self tends to hear "freedom" and imagine unrestricted choice. Paul hears freedom and immediately speaks of belonging: "You were bought at a price" ([1 Corinthians 6:20](#)), and "through love serve one another" ([Galatians 5:13](#)). Christian liberty is not independence from lordship. It is liberation into the lordship of Christ.

The Corinthian maxims in [1 Corinthians 6:12](#) and 10:23 are therefore decisive for questions of pleasure. Interpreters debate the precise quotation boundaries and whether Paul is citing Corinthian slogans or stating principles that he immediately qualifies; the ethical force of his response is clear (Garland, 2003; Thiselton, 2000). Paul does not answer "everything is permissible" by producing a new list of human prohibitions. He subjects permissibility to deeper tests. Is it beneficial? Does it build up? Does it master? Does it consider the good of the other person rather than merely the self ([1 Corinthians 10:24](#))? The same apostle who fiercely resists legalistic restrictions can voluntarily surrender a right for the sake of another person's conscience and the advance of the gospel ([1 Corinthians 8:7-13](#); [1 Corinthians 9:1-23](#)). Christian liberty is therefore not self-authorization. It is freedom disciplined by belonging to Christ and by love for the community. Liberty and love are not enemies. Love is the shape liberty takes when the self is no longer sovereign.

[Romans 14](#) adds a second essential distinction. Christians can disagree about food and days without despising or condemning one another because God has received them ([Romans 14:1-12](#)). Schreiner (2018) emphasizes that the chapter addresses disputed practices within the community rather than dissolving clear moral commands into private preference. The strong must not flaunt liberty in a way that destroys the weak, and the weak must not turn personal scruples into a tribunal over the strong ([Romans 14:13-23](#)). This text protects tender consciences and guards against spiritual bullying. But [Romans 14](#) does not make every moral question disputable. Paul does not place adultery, idolatry, theft, drunkenness, or occult practice in the category of optional conscience. Christian liberty operates where God has not forbidden, not where God has spoken clearly and the believer prefers another verdict.

This distinction is especially important because churches can weaponize the language of "stumbling." A manipulative person can say, "If you do that, I might stumble," and thereby attempt to control everyone else's lawful choices. Paul's concern is not that the most restrictive conscience in a community receives universal veto power. The concern is love for someone whose conscience may be genuinely drawn into sin by imitation. The stronger believer is not called to perform liberty as a badge of maturity, while the weaker believer is called to grow in truth rather than remain permanently captive to fear. Mature pastoral care protects both liberty and conscience.

Self-control sits at the center of this freedom. In [Galatians 5:22-23](#) it is fruit of the Spirit, not a self-salvation project. In [1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#) Paul uses athletic discipline as an analogy for purposeful Christian living. In [Titus 2:11-14](#) grace itself trains believers to renounce ungodliness and worldly desires and to live self-controlled lives while waiting for Christ. This is a crucial gospel order. The believer does

not control appetite in order to become accepted. The accepted believer learns, by grace, not to be controlled by appetite.

The strongest objection says that such language can turn ordinary enjoyment into chronic suspicion. If every meal, song, game, drink, holiday, or hobby must be morally audited, will Christianity not produce anxious people who can never relax? That danger is real, especially for readers prone to scrupulosity. Scripture does not command perpetual self-surveillance. It commands gratitude, joy, fellowship, feasting, singing, rest, celebration, and the reception of created goods as gifts ([Deuteronomy 14:22-27](#); [Ecclesiastes 9:7-9](#); [1 Timothy 4:4-5](#)). The Christian life is not a laboratory in which pleasure is presumed guilty until proven innocent. It is a life in which pleasure is welcomed under thanksgiving and kept beneath lordship.

The opposite objection says that self-control is private: if a practice does not visibly harm others, no one may question it. But biblical love asks more than whether harm is immediately observable. Drunkenness can burden a family. Smoking can expose others to harmful smoke and divert household resources. Gambling can consume money owed to dependents. Binge entertainment can remove a parent emotionally from children. Celebrity fixation can reshape a young person's identity. A hobby can be harmless in abstraction and unloving in a specific life because of time, money, secrecy, example, or mastery. Christian ethics is personal but never merely private.

A useful moral classification therefore emerges. Explicit biblical prohibitions bind the conscience directly: drunkenness, greed, idolatry, occult practice, and other clearly named sins are not matters of liberty. Biblical principles govern modern practices Scripture does not name: sobriety, stewardship, love, self-control, bodily care, truthfulness, and watchfulness. Wisdom asks about circumstance, vulnerability, risk, history, and foreseeable consequences. Conscience matters where God has left room. Christian liberty protects freedom within that room. The believer sins both by crossing God's boundary and by pretending a human boundary is God's.

The question is not simply, "Can I do this?" A more mature examination asks, "Can I do this to the glory of God?" ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)). Can I stop without panic or resentment? Can I receive it openly rather than secretly? Can I abstain for the sake of someone I love? Does it sharpen or dull my ability to pray? Does it make me more available to duty or less? Does it leave me thankful or hungry for a stronger dose? These questions are not new commandments. They are ways of exposing whether liberty is still liberty.

8.2 Alcohol: Abstinence, Moderation, and Drunkenness

Few pleasure questions reveal the danger of oversimplification more clearly than alcohol. One Christian tradition can speak as though a sip of wine proves compromise. Another can flaunt drinking as evidence of freedom from legalism. Both can make the beverage carry a symbolic weight Scripture itself does not give it. The abstainer may become proud, and the drinker may become defensive. The biblical task is to distinguish what Scripture permits, what it condemns, and what wisdom may require in particular lives.

Scripture does not present wine as intrinsically evil. Wine appears in ordinary agricultural life and celebration; [Psalm 104](#) speaks of wine that gladdens the human heart ([Psalm 104:14-15](#)). Jesus' first sign in John's Gospel turns water into wine at a wedding feast ([John 2:1-11](#)). Paul advises Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach and frequent illnesses ([1 Timothy 5:23](#)). These texts make a universal doctrine that every consumption of alcoholic wine is sinful difficult to sustain. At the same time, the Bible's ordinary use of wine alongside repeated warnings about drunkenness makes it equally difficult to

maintain that every positive reference must mean unfermented juice. The relevant texts must be interpreted in context rather than settled by lexical slogans. Scripture permits wine; it never permits the worship of wine, the pursuit of intoxication, or the surrender of sober judgment.

Scripture is equally clear that drunkenness is sin. "Do not get drunk with wine" is an explicit apostolic command ([Ephesians 5:18](#)). Drunkenness is associated with dissipation, impaired judgment, disorder, and a life incompatible with the kingdom when embraced as an unrepentant pattern ([Romans 13:13](#); [1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#); [Galatians 5:19-21](#); [1 Peter 4:3](#)). Proverbs gives extended warnings about wine's power to deceive, produce strife, distort perception, and enslave desire ([Proverbs 20:1](#); [Proverbs 23:29-35](#)). Scripture also links abstention from intoxicating drink with circumstances requiring unusually clear judgment, as in priestly service and royal responsibility ([Leviticus 10:8-11](#); [Proverbs 31:4-5](#)). Those texts do not create a universal abstinence command for every believer, but they reinforce a biblical concern for alertness, judgment, and responsibility. The Bible therefore neither demonizes the created substance nor trivializes intoxication.

Contemporary health evidence complicates the old assumption that moderate alcohol use can be treated as medically neutral. The World Health Organization describes ethanol as psychoactive, toxic, and dependence-producing and estimates that alcohol contributed to about 2.6 million deaths worldwide in 2019. It also estimates that roughly 400 million people aged fifteen and older lived with alcohol use disorders, including 209 million with alcohol dependence (World Health Organization, 2024a). The same fact sheet notes that health risks can occur even at low levels, although most alcohol-related harm comes from heavy episodic or continuous consumption. This evidence does not by itself create a new biblical command, and population-level medical risk is not identical to the moral category of sin. It does mean that the Christian conversation cannot responsibly be reduced to "the Bible permits wine, so health concerns are irrelevant."

The strongest defense of moderate drinking is serious. Scripture permits it. Adults can consume modest amounts without becoming intoxicated. Shared wine may belong to culture, cuisine, celebration, hospitality, and covenant remembrance in some Christian traditions. A blanket prohibition may bind consciences where God has not bound them and can even encourage hypocrisy when people hide lawful conduct from religious communities. That defense has real force.

Yet permission is not obligation, and liberty is not a dare. Total abstinence can be a wise, honorable, and loving Christian choice without becoming a condition of justification. Some Christians have especially compelling reasons not to drink: alcohol use disorder, a strong family history of dependence, medication interactions, pregnancy-related medical concerns, a history of destructive behavior while drinking, vocational responsibilities requiring unimpaired judgment, or a conscience that cannot drink in faith. A recovering person who says, "I cannot safely have one," does not display weak Christianity by refusing a liberty. That refusal may be wisdom and courage. Pastors and friends should never pressure such a believer to prove freedom by taking the substance that once mastered him or her. Christian freedom includes freedom to abstain without apology and without pride.

Leadership adds another layer. The New Testament requires overseers and deacons not to be addicted to much wine and repeatedly associates leadership with sober-mindedness and self-control ([1 Timothy 3:2-3](#), 8; [Titus 1:7-9](#)). The point is not that church leaders inhabit a separate gospel but that visible responsibility intensifies the need for judgment, example, and freedom from mastery. A leader who jokes about drunkenness, organizes ministry culture around alcohol, or dismisses a congregant's recovery story as legalism has misunderstood pastoral liberty.

The stumbling question also requires care. If a mature believer knows that drinking in a specific setting is likely to draw a recovering person back into bondage, love can surrender the right. That is not

an admission that the drink itself was universally sinful. It is recognition that people matter more than demonstrating freedom ([Romans 14:13-21](#)). Conversely, the mere existence of Christians who believe all drinking is sinful does not automatically mean every Christian everywhere must abstain forever. Love teaches restraint, not servitude to every accusation.

Where, then, is the moral line before obvious drunkenness? Scripture does not provide a universal blood-alcohol percentage. Christian wisdom therefore asks whether judgment, speech, reaction, sexual boundaries, driving capacity, or self-command are being impaired. The intention to reach a "buzz," loosen inhibitions, escape consciousness, or become less responsible moves the practice toward the very condition biblical sobriety resists. A Christian should not need a laboratory threshold to recognize the spiritual significance of deliberately seeking diminished self-government.

There is also a pastoral difference between drunkenness celebrated as rebellion and alcohol use disorder experienced as a bondage a person hates and is fighting. Both may involve sinful actions and serious consequences, but the second requires sustained treatment and mercy alongside repentance. Abrupt cessation can be medically dangerous for some people with severe alcohol dependence; current clinical guidance recognizes that a subset of patients need supervised withdrawal management before longer-term treatment begins (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2025). The church must not force a choice between clinical care and discipleship. Wise treatment can be part of discipleship, and receiving such care is not a failure of faith.

The legalist's false assurance says, "I never drink, therefore I am holy." The libertine's false assurance says, "Jesus made wine, therefore no one may question my drinking." Scripture dismantles both. Abstinence cannot justify. Wine cannot lord. The question is whether Christ is Lord when the glass is present and when it is absent.

8.3 Nicotine, Cigarettes, and Vaping

Cigarettes and vaping illustrate why Christian ethics cannot depend on a list of nouns found in an ancient text. Tobacco was unknown to the biblical writers, modern nicotine delivery systems even more so. The Bible therefore contains no verse saying, "You shall not vape." But it would be a mistake to infer that Scripture has nothing to say. The relevant moral categories are bodily stewardship, addiction, harm to neighbor, expenditure, example, legality, and mastery.

Modern evidence about smoked tobacco is unusually clear. The World Health Organization reported in June 2026 that tobacco kills more than seven million people each year, including more than 1.6 million non-smokers exposed to second-hand smoke. It states that all forms of tobacco use are harmful and that there is no safe level of exposure. Nicotine is highly addictive, with particular concern for children, adolescents, and young adults (World Health Organization, 2026a). These are not theological claims. They are public-health facts that Christian moral reasoning must take seriously because love of neighbor and stewardship of embodied life are theological concerns.

Vaping requires more nuance than the slogan "it is just water vapor" or the opposite slogan "it is exactly the same as smoking." Electronic cigarettes do not burn tobacco in the same way combustible cigarettes do. Current Cochrane evidence indicates that nicotine e-cigarettes can improve smoking-cessation rates for adults who smoke when used as cessation aids, although that evidence does not make long-term recreational vaping harmless (Lindson et al., 2025). The distinction matters. Harm reduction for an adult who would otherwise continue smoking is a different moral and clinical situation from a never-smoker, adolescent, or young adult taking up nicotine for stimulation, image, novelty, or recreation. Health authorities continue to warn that e-cigarette aerosol can contain nicotine and other

harmful substances and that youth use carries particular risks. Christian moral reasoning should therefore neither deny credible cessation evidence nor convert harm reduction into a general blessing of recreational nicotine use.

The strongest defense says that nicotine itself can produce alertness, that adults accept many health risks voluntarily, and that Christians routinely consume substances such as caffeine without moral panic. It also notes that not every unwise health choice is a sin in the same sense or degree. Those points should restrain careless condemnation. Christianity does not teach that maximizing biological longevity is the highest good, and believers should not create a salvation-by-health regime in which every dietary or lifestyle risk becomes a church-discipline offense.

Still, the addiction question is decisive. A substance designed, marketed, or used in a way that repeatedly binds desire deserves scrutiny under [1 Corinthians 6:12](#). The smoker who says, "I can quit whenever I want," but repeatedly cannot, already has evidence that mastery has shifted. The vaper who becomes agitated when the device is unavailable, organizes the day around nicotine, hides expenditure from a spouse, or continues despite serious medical advice should not hide behind the absence of a proof-text. The issue is not that nicotine possesses mystical impurity. It is that a created person can become functionally obedient to a chemical demand.

Second-hand exposure raises love-of-neighbor concerns that private-risk arguments cannot answer. A person may decide to accept risk for himself; he does not automatically receive the right to impose smoke or aerosol exposure on children, coworkers, congregants, or family members. Christian freedom is constrained by the neighbor's good ([Philippians 2:3-4](#); [1 Corinthians 10:24](#)). Household stewardship matters too. In settings where money for cigarettes competes with food, school fees, medical care, debt obligations, or support of dependents, what appears to be a "personal habit" becomes a justice issue within the family.

Pastoral care should avoid humiliation. Nicotine dependence can be powerful. Shame often drives secrecy rather than freedom. A Christian trying repeatedly to quit should not be told that every craving proves lack of salvation. Temptation and physiological withdrawal are not identical to consent. At the same time, "this is an addiction" should not become a vow of surrender. Evidence-based cessation support, medical guidance, counseling, replacement therapies where appropriate, accountability, changed routines, prayer, and patient perseverance can work together. The believer is not required to pretend freedom before it exists, but neither should bondage be renamed liberty.

This topic also exposes conservative hypocrisy. A church may condemn smoking because it is culturally disreputable while ignoring overeating, rage, pornography, workaholism, gossip, or compulsive phone use among respectable members. Selective disgust is not holiness. The same principle of mastery that examines nicotine must examine every appetite. Yet inconsistency elsewhere does not make smoking wise. One sin cannot acquit another.

8.4 Cannabis and Recreational Drugs

Cannabis has moved rapidly in many societies from criminalized stigma to medical product, commercial industry, wellness accessory, and recreational norm. That shift can make Christian discussion reactive. Some believers treat any cannabis use as obviously equivalent to hard-drug abuse. Others invoke legality, natural origin, therapeutic research, or cultural change as though the moral question were settled. A responsible approach must distinguish medical use, recreational intoxication, dependence, potency, legality, and spiritual purpose.

The first distinction is between medicine and intoxication. Scripture does not oppose medicine because it alters bodily processes. Anesthetic drugs intentionally suppress consciousness during surgery; psychiatric medications can alter mood, attention, sleep, or perception; analgesics reduce pain. The moral question is not whether a chemical affects the brain but why, how, under whose care, at what risk, and toward what end. A medically indicated cannabis-derived product used under responsible clinical guidance is therefore not morally equivalent to recreational use aimed at becoming high. The same principle applies to other controlled medications.

Recreational cannabis is often defended as less harmful than alcohol, more natural than pharmaceuticals, or capable of relaxation and creativity. Some adults also argue that a low dose sought for mild relaxation should not be morally equated with gross drunkenness. That rebuttal deserves a fair hearing: Scripture does not supply a universal THC concentration, blood level, or modern pharmacological threshold by which every psychoactive effect can be classified automatically. "God made the plant," however, does not settle the question either. Created origin does not establish every use as good. God made grapes; drunkenness remains sin. God made poppies; opioid misuse remains dangerous. Creation gives materials; command, wisdom, motive, dose, effect, law, love of neighbor, and mastery govern their use.

Current evidence also resists the idea that cannabis is harmless. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that approximately three in ten people who use cannabis may develop cannabis use disorder, with higher risk among those who begin young or use frequently (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024a). Cannabis can impair memory, learning, attention, decision-making, coordination, reaction time, and emotion, and its use is associated with risks that vary by dose, frequency, age, product, and individual vulnerability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025a). These data do not prove that every use has the same effect or that every user will become dependent. They do undermine the claim that risk is imaginary.

Biblically, the central concern is sober, watchful self-government under Christ. The New Testament uses sobriety language both literally and metaphorically because alertness matters for prayer, resistance to temptation, and readiness ([1 Thessalonians 5:6-8](#); [1 Peter 1:13](#); [1 Peter 5:8](#)). Christians should therefore resist two opposite shortcuts. It is too broad to say that every trace psychoactive effect is morally identical to drunkenness; many legitimate medicines affect mood, pain, attention, or perception. It is also too permissive to say that deliberately seeking a recreational high is morally neutral merely because the intoxicant is not wine. Where the purpose or predictable effect is to diminish judgment, impair self-command, or make sobriety itself undesirable, the practice collides with the biblical call to watchfulness. The ethical question is not solved by changing the chemical or by finding the lowest dose that can still be defended.

This becomes even more significant with psychedelics and spiritualized drug use. Contemporary research is examining substances such as psilocybin and other psychedelic drugs for potential medical applications. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued final guidance in July 2026 precisely because therapeutic research is growing and clinical trials present distinctive safety and design challenges (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2026). The National Institute on Drug Abuse likewise distinguishes clinical research from use outside medical settings for recreation, well-being, or spiritual self-exploration (National Institute on Drug Abuse, n.d.). That distinction should matter to Christians. A controlled investigation under medical oversight is not the same thing as taking a hallucinogen to seek revelation, dissolve the ego, contact spiritual beings, or awaken divine consciousness.

New Age and entheogenic spirituality often interprets altered states as windows into higher reality. Psychedelic experiences may be described as mystical union, ego death, cosmic consciousness, access to

spirit guides, ancestral revelation, or discovery of an inner divine self. The experiences can feel overwhelmingly meaningful. But intensity does not establish truth. A chemically altered perception is not self-authenticating revelation. Scripture tells believers to test spirits and teaching by the apostolic confession and Word, not by vividness of experience ([Deuteronomy 13:1-4](#); [Isaiah 8:20](#); [1 John 4:1-6](#)). The Christian does not need to chemically suspend ordinary perception in order to gain secret access to God. Access to the Father is through the Son, by the Spirit ([Ephesians 2:18](#)).

Clinical caution is also warranted. The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health notes that psilocybin experiences can be unpredictable and may include extreme fear, confusion, panic, anxiety, paranoia, persistent psychosis, and other adverse effects, with particular concerns for people with certain psychiatric conditions (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, n.d.). Again, medical risk is not identical to sin, but romanticizing altered states as harmless spirituality is factually and theologically irresponsible.

Legality does not settle the issue. Civil law varies by jurisdiction and can be stricter or looser than Christian wisdom. [Romans 13](#) ordinarily requires respect for lawful authority, so illegal possession adds another moral dimension except where obedience to human law would require disobedience to God. Yet legalization cannot transform intoxication into sobriety. A casino can be legal. Adultery can be legal. Greed can be legal. The Christian conscience is not outsourced to the legislature.

Pastoral distinctions remain essential. A person using clinician-supervised cannabis for severe pain is not to be accused as though he were seeking escape. A teenager experimenting under peer pressure, an adult dependent on daily cannabis to function, a cancer patient using a prescribed product, and a spiritual seeker ingesting psychedelics for "awakening" occupy different moral and clinical situations. Truthful care refuses one-size-fits-all condemnation. It also refuses the claim that every use becomes righteous when called medicine, wellness, or spirituality.

The self-examination is direct. Am I seeking healing, or am I seeking escape from reality? Am I using a legitimate treatment responsibly, or am I using medical language to protect recreational intoxication? Do I want clarity before God or relief from having to be clear? If a substance must repeatedly alter consciousness for me to tolerate my life, then beneath the chemical question may lie grief, trauma, anxiety, depression, loneliness, or despair that deserves compassionate treatment rather than a spiritualized fog. Christ meets people in reality. He does not require intoxication to become present.

8.5 Prescription Drug Misuse and Chemical Escape

Prescription medicines expose a moral confusion that is common in discussions of appetite. A drug can be medically legitimate and still be misused. It can be prescribed by a competent clinician and later become an object of dependence. It can relieve real pain and also become a way of escaping emotional pain for which it was never intended. It can be necessary for one patient and dangerous for another. Any Christian ethic that simply divides chemicals into "good medicine" and "bad drugs" will fail people who live inside these complexities.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse defines prescription-drug misuse to include taking a medicine in a manner or dose other than prescribed, taking another person's prescription, or taking a medicine for the purpose of euphoria. Commonly misused classes include opioids, central nervous system depressants, and stimulants (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2026). The moral importance of this definition is not that every deviation from a dosing schedule constitutes grave rebellion. It is that a prescription label does not make every use morally or medically safe. Legitimate authority over a

medicine is tied to its therapeutic purpose, the patient's actual condition, informed medical guidance, and truthful use.

Christians must also reject the stigma that sometimes surrounds necessary psychiatric or pain medication. A person who takes an antidepressant, an ADHD medicine, a sleep medicine, an anticonvulsant, an opioid after surgery, or another prescribed drug is not demonstrating spiritual weakness merely because the medicine affects the nervous system. Paul did not oppose practical care in the name of faith, and Scripture never requires believers to prove trust in God by refusing ordinary means ([Luke 10:34](#); [1 Timothy 5:23](#)). Prayer and medicine are not competitors when medicine is used truthfully and responsibly.

The problem emerges when the purpose changes. A sedative becomes a nightly chemical refuge from any difficult emotion. A stimulant prescribed for a diagnosed condition is taken in larger doses to sustain an impossible work schedule or produce euphoria. Pain medication is continued beyond medical need because numbness feels safer than grief. Pills are shared among friends as though a physician's original prescription transferred with them. Someone combines substances despite warnings because the desired state matters more than prudence. In such cases the central issue is not merely chemistry. It is a relationship to reality, pain, control, and mastery.

The strongest objection is compassionate: many people who misuse medication are not thrill-seekers but sufferers. National survey data support that complexity. In the United States, most respondents who reported recent misuse of prescription pain relievers cited pain relief as the reason rather than getting high (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2025). This does not make misuse safe. It shows why simplistic moralizing can be cruel. Chronic pain, inadequate access to care, untreated trauma, anxiety, insomnia, or dependence can sit behind behavior that appears from the outside to be merely reckless. Pastoral care should ask what the person is trying to survive, not only what substance is present.

Yet compassion must include truth. A person can have real pain and still lie to obtain medication. A person can have trauma and still endanger children by driving while impaired. A person can be dependent and still bear responsibility to seek help rather than conceal the problem indefinitely. The gospel does not require us to choose between seeing the wound and seeing the sin. It gives language for both. Jesus is not honored by calling suffering rebellion, and He is not honored by calling destructive choices therapeutic simply because suffering preceded them.

Chemical escape can also take a religious form. In therapeutic and New Age cultures, substances are sometimes integrated into narratives of self-healing, "inner work," consciousness expansion, or release from the ego. Some practices may borrow medical vocabulary while operating outside credible clinical care. Christians should distinguish verified treatment from spiritual entrepreneurship. A retreat leader's promise of breakthrough is not equivalent to a regulated medical protocol. A testimony of transformation is not evidence of safety. And an altered state is not proof that God has revealed hidden truth.

For a believer who recognizes misuse, repentance may include disclosure, medical review, supervised tapering where clinically indicated, securing or surrendering medications, changes in prescribing arrangements, counseling, accountability, restitution for deception or theft, and patient rebuilding of ordinary coping. Abruptly stopping some drugs can be dangerous; no chapter on holiness should encourage medically unsafe withdrawal. The aim is not dramatic self-punishment. It is truthful freedom.

This is where the church must speak with unusual tenderness to people in chronic pain. The body can hurt for years. Sleep can fail. Trauma can flood the nervous system. The person seeking relief should not

be made to feel morally suspect for wanting the pain to stop. Jesus' compassion toward sufferers gives no basis for such suspicion. The question is whether relief is being sought through wise means under truth, or whether relief has become the supreme good for which truth, safety, and responsibility may be sacrificed. Pain deserves care. It does not deserve to become a tyrant that recruits another tyrant.

8.6 Gambling, Lotteries, Casinos, and Sports Betting

Gambling has become one of the clearest examples of a practice that can move from marginal vice to normalized entertainment without changing its underlying moral questions. The casino is no longer only a building. It can sit in a pocket, follow a sports broadcast, send promotional notifications, offer micro-bets during a match, and turn ordinary spectatorship into a continuous opportunity to stake money on uncertainty. This normalization does not make every person who buys a lottery ticket clinically addicted. It does make the church's old habit of treating gambling as someone else's vice increasingly unrealistic.

Scripture contains no sentence that says, "You shall not purchase a lottery ticket." That absence has led some Christians to classify all gambling as a matter of liberty. The strongest defense points out that many activities involve risk: entrepreneurship, farming, insurance, investment, and even choosing a profession. A small wager among friends may be recreational rather than greedy. A lottery ticket may cost less than other forms of entertainment. Sports betting may include knowledge and skill rather than pure chance. Governments may direct gambling revenues toward public purposes. If no one is coerced and the amount is affordable, the argument concludes, why should the church call it sin?

This defense correctly shows that risk itself is not the problem. Biblical stewardship would be impossible without prudent risk. The servants in Jesus' parable of the talents are expected to use entrusted resources productively rather than bury them through fear ([Matthew 25:14-30](#)), although that parable is not an investment manual. Proverbs commends diligence, planning, and patience ([Proverbs 21:5](#)), while Ecclesiastes recognizes diversified action under uncertainty ([Ecclesiastes 11:1-6](#)). Appeals to biblical casting of lots do not establish wagering as a Christian liberty. [Proverbs 16:33](#) and [Acts 1:26](#) concern decisions placed under God's providence, not staking money for private gain; the soldiers' casting lots for Jesus' clothing is narrative description, not moral authorization ([John 19:23-24](#)). Commerce, vocation, and stewardship all involve uncertainty. The moral question is what kind of risk is being taken, toward what end, with whose resources, and by what economic relationship.

Gambling ordinarily stakes value on an uncertain event primarily so that the winner receives value because others lose. That feature does not make every wager morally identical, but it separates gambling from productive investment more clearly than the mere presence of risk. A business can create goods, employment, services, and durable value even while the investor risks loss. A wager is structured around the transfer of stakes according to an outcome that does not itself create the wealth being won. In commercial gambling, the operator's model also depends on aggregate player losses.

The public-health evidence is sobering. The World Health Organization estimates that about 1.2 percent of the world's adult population has gambling disorder, while warning that gambling-related harm extends far beyond those who meet diagnostic criteria. It lists financial distress, relationship breakdown, family violence, neglect, mental-health harms, suicide risk, and diversion of household spending from essential needs among the consequences. WHO also notes that people gambling at harmful levels account for a large share of industry losses and that digital access and commercialization are expanding exposure (World Health Organization, 2024b). Those facts do not prove that every wager

produces these outcomes. They expose the weakness of describing the industry simply as harmless entertainment.

The moral problem becomes sharper when gambling is built on hope of easy money. Proverbs repeatedly opposes hastily gained wealth to patient diligence: "Wealth obtained by fraud will dwindle, but whoever earns it through labor will multiply it" ([Proverbs 13:11](#)). "An inheritance gained prematurely will not be blessed ultimately" ([Proverbs 20:21](#)). The texts do not address lotteries directly, but they reveal a moral imagination in which provision ordinarily comes through work, wisdom, generosity, inheritance responsibly received, and God's providence rather than fantasies of sudden gain. Gambling can train the heart to desire reward without corresponding service, production, or stewardship.

Greed is not proved by the size of a bet. A poor person can gamble greedily with one dollar, and a wealthy person can lose thousands without feeling it. The relevant question is desire. Why is the money staked? Is the excitement itself the product? Is the hope that one dramatic win will rescue a life from debts created by previous wagers? Is there chasing of losses? Are household resources being placed at risk? Is the person thinking repeatedly about the next bet? Has secrecy begun? Has a sports match become difficult to enjoy unless money is attached to it? These are signs that entertainment language may be hiding mastery.

Lotteries raise an additional justice concern because participation often draws heavily from people who can least afford loss, even when the ticket is marketed as a harmless dream. A government may use revenue for schools or public programs, but beneficial allocation of revenue does not by itself settle the morality of the mechanism used to obtain it. Christians should be wary of moral arithmetic in which a good destination automatically sanctifies a practice that may exploit hope, financial desperation, or cognitive biases.

Sports betting intensifies the problem by merging fandom, advertising, data, and constant mobile access. The bettor can be invited to interpret every possession, goal, card, injury, or player statistic as a financial opportunity. What was once recreation becomes a market of continuous arousal. The Christian question is not whether knowing a team's statistics involves skill. It is whether the structure of wagering is forming greed, anxiety, compulsion, and distorted attention. Skill can change probabilities; it does not change the nature of the stake.

Pastoral care must again distinguish sin from disorder without separating them absolutely. Gambling disorder is recognized clinically as a pattern involving impaired control, priority over other activities, and continuation despite consequences. A person trapped there may need specialized treatment, financial barriers, self-exclusion programs, debt counseling, family safeguards, and long-term accountability. Telling such a person simply to "have more faith" is inadequate. Telling him that he has no responsibility because he has a disorder is also inadequate. Recovery may require both grace and structure.

The church should also examine its own fundraising imagination. Raffles, prize drawings, games of chance, or casino-themed fundraisers can be defended as harmless because the proceeds support ministry. Even where local law permits them and the amounts are small, churches should ask what they are catechizing. Does the body of Christ need to train desire through chance-based reward in order to fund the mission of Christ? This is a wisdom question in some forms, but it deserves more than the assumption that a religious beneficiary makes the mechanism spiritually neutral.

A Christian may ask, "Is one small bet automatically proof of unregeneration?" No. Scripture does not authorize that conclusion, nor does it contain an explicit command naming every possible wager.

Salvation is not earned by never placing a bet. Yet absence of a noun-level prohibition does not make the moral structure irrelevant. Gambling becomes plainly sinful where it expresses greed, neglects dependents, risks resources one is obligated to preserve, exploits another person's vulnerability, violates law or conscience, or becomes enslaving. Even where those features are not immediately demonstrable, the better question is why a disciple would cultivate a practice whose pleasure commonly trades on uncertain gain, repeated loss, and the dream of reward detached from productive stewardship. Christian liberty is not measured by how unnecessary a temptation one can safely carry.

8.7 Speculation, Risk, and the Dream of Easy Money

Gambling and investment overlap at the level of risk but should not be collapsed. If every uncertain financial action were gambling, entrepreneurship, agriculture, lending, pensions, and ordinary investment would become morally suspect. If every market transaction were automatically "investment," however, Christians could baptize reckless speculation with respectable vocabulary. The moral task is to distinguish productive risk-bearing from a gambling mentality.

Responsible investment ordinarily directs capital toward an asset, enterprise, debt instrument, or productive activity with a rational expectation of return over time. The investor can still lose. Markets can be unjust. Speculation can sometimes provide liquidity or price discovery. There is therefore no biblical command that Christians must avoid all short-term trading, all volatile assets, or all markets they cannot physically touch. The categories require more precision.

A gambling mentality appears when the dominant attraction is rapid gain, extreme leverage, excitement, social proof, fear of missing out, or the fantasy that one dramatic move will bypass patient stewardship. The same person who would never enter a casino may repeatedly place highly leveraged trades he does not understand because a social-media personality promises a "sure" move. The interface may display charts instead of slot reels, but the heart can still be chasing a rush.

Financial regulators warn for a reason. FINRA's day-trading risk disclosure states that day trading can be extremely risky and generally is inappropriate for people with limited resources, limited experience, or low risk tolerance; it explicitly warns against using funds needed for living expenses, education, or other essential purposes (Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, n.d.). This is not a theological verdict on all day trading. It is authoritative evidence that the practice can expose participants to rapid and substantial loss. Christian stewardship should not pretend that risk disappears because an activity takes place in a brokerage account rather than a betting application.

The strongest defense of speculation is that markets need participants willing to take positions under uncertainty and that some professional traders operate with disciplined strategies rather than mere chance. This is correct. Moral analysis should not accuse every trader of greed. A person may be highly skilled, properly capitalized, transparent with a spouse or organization, and operating within a coherent risk framework. The Bible does not prescribe a holding period that turns trade into investment after a certain number of days.

The deeper test is the structure of desire and responsibility. Is the person risking money that belongs morally to dependents? Is borrowed money being used to magnify exposure? Is there truthful understanding of downside risk? Is success producing gratitude or grandiosity? Are losses being chased in an attempt to recover emotional equilibrium? Is work being neglected because markets must be watched constantly? Is prayer replaced by compulsive checking? Does the person feel most alive when a position moves violently? The line between investing and gambling can run through the heart before it runs through the instrument.

Cryptocurrency, derivatives, options, foreign exchange, meme stocks, and other volatile markets should therefore not be declared sinful by category. They also should not be marketed to Christians as magical ladders to wealth. "God told me this coin will explode," "the Spirit gave me the entry price," or "sow into this trade and believe" mixes finance with counterfeit revelation. God may guide providentially, but the Holy Spirit is not a substitute for due diligence, and spiritual language must not shield financial claims from evidence. Chapter 9 will address prosperity and manifestation theology more directly; here the warning is simpler. Desire for easy money can recruit religious certainty as leverage.

There is a particular danger when speculation becomes a form of escape from ordinary vocation. Some people feel ashamed of slow progress and become vulnerable to narratives that portray patient work as foolish. The internet is full of images of instant wealth, luxury, and "financial freedom" that omit survivorship bias, leverage, hidden sponsorships, inherited capital, or losses. Proverbs' praise of diligent labor is not an argument against innovation. It is a reminder that God ordinarily forms character through patient faithfulness, not fantasies of exemption from creaturely limits ([Proverbs 12:11](#); [Proverbs 14:23](#); [Proverbs 21:5](#)).

A Christian can seek wealth without worshiping wealth, take risk without loving risk, and invest without demanding certainty. But if financial speculation is becoming the place where hope, identity, excitement, and imagined salvation converge, then the problem is no longer merely portfolio allocation. It is worship. The market cannot forgive, resurrect, or name the believer. Christ can.

8.8 Gaming, Streaming, and Binge Entertainment

Games and stories are ancient human goods. Play can develop skill, imagination, friendship, strategic thought, laughter, and rest. Narrative can enlarge moral perception, carry memory, expose evil, cultivate empathy, and delight the mind. A Christian critique of modern entertainment that begins by assuming recreation is spiritually suspicious will distort creation. Children play. Adults need leisure. Jesus attended meals and weddings. Scripture contains song, poetry, dramatic narrative, riddles, imagery, and aesthetic craft. The issue is not whether Christians may enjoy mediated entertainment. It is whether entertainment remains a servant of life or becomes an architecture of escape.

Modern gaming adds features earlier forms of play did not possess: persistent online worlds, ranked competition, social networks, microtransactions, loot-like reward systems, live-service updates, endless progression, and economies that can blur play, spending, status, and identity. None of these elements is automatically sinful. They do increase the need for discernment because the game can be designed not merely to be enjoyed but to retain attention and monetize return.

It is important not to medicalize every enthusiastic gamer. The World Health Organization explicitly states that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who play. Its clinical definition requires impaired control, increasing priority over gaming, continuation despite negative consequences, and significant impairment in important areas of functioning, ordinarily evident over an extended period (World Health Organization, n.d.-a). This protects ordinary hobbyists from careless labeling. A teenager who enjoys games intensely is not therefore disordered, and a Christian parent should not use diagnostic language as a weapon for every conflict over screen time.

The clinical criteria are nevertheless strikingly compatible with Paul's spiritual language of mastery. When gaming takes priority over worship, school, work, sleep, embodied relationships, hygiene, financial obligations, or family responsibilities; when attempts to stop repeatedly fail; when the person

continues despite serious consequences; the issue is no longer simply preference. It is bondage expressed through a modern medium.

Streaming platforms create a related problem by removing natural stopping points. Autoplay, season releases, recommendation systems, and cliffhanger structures can turn "one episode" into an entire night. A systematic review and meta-analysis of binge-watching research found positive associations with depression, loneliness, sleep problems, anxiety, and stress, although the included studies were observational and causation cannot be assumed (Alimoradi et al., 2022). The correct conclusion is not that watching several episodes causes mental illness. It is that compulsive viewing often travels with patterns of distress and disrupted life serious enough to warrant attention.

The strongest defense is obvious and often correct: after difficult work, watching a series or playing a game may be legitimate rest. Friends can play together. Stories can be excellent art. Gaming communities can provide real social connection, including for disabled or geographically isolated people. Some games cultivate creativity, coordination, language learning, leadership, or problem-solving. A blanket ban would mistake a medium for a moral verdict.

The question becomes sharper when entertainment functions as emotional anesthesia. A person returns from work and cannot tolerate silence, prayer, conversation, or unstructured thought, so a screen begins immediately and remains until sleep. Another postpones grief by living nightly in fictional worlds. Another uses gaming to avoid vocational decisions. Another parent is physically in the home but psychologically unavailable for hours. Another believer has time for three seasons of a series but repeatedly tells God there is no time to read Scripture. The sin is not measured by a universal number of episodes. The pattern reveals what receives available attention.

Time stewardship must also avoid a cruel productivity gospel. Human beings are not machines whose every minute must produce measurable output. Sabbath itself rebukes endless productivity. Leisure can honor God by restoring the person for love, work, prayer, and community. The question is not "Was this minute economically productive?" It is "Does my pattern of leisure serve a faithful human life?" A nap can be more obedient than another hour of work. A game with children can be more important than answering email. A film shared with friends can deepen fellowship. Rest and sloth are not identical.

Gaming economies deserve specific attention. In-game purchases, randomized rewards, cosmetics, battle passes, and status items can create spending patterns especially risky for children or compulsive users. The moral problem is not that digital goods are unreal. People pay for theater, music, and other experiences. The problem arises when reward schedules exploit impulsivity, obscure real spending, or train repeated purchasing through near-miss and scarcity mechanics. Parents and churches should teach financial discernment without treating every paid game as theft.

Competitive gaming can also reveal the heart through anger, contempt, and identity. A person who would never swear at a colleague may rage at strangers through a headset. A believer who appears gentle in church may become verbally abusive when losing. Jesus' lordship does not switch off when an avatar appears. Speech, patience, honesty, sexual purity, and love of neighbor travel online because the Christian remains the same moral agent.

The pastoral test is not whether the hobby looks modern. It is whether it remains proportionate. Can you stop at the time you intended? Can you lose without becoming cruel? Can you take a week away without feeling empty? Does your family experience your hobby as refreshment or abandonment? Are you buying enjoyment or buying escape? Does the game leave you more capable of returning to reality, or more resentful that reality exists? Entertainment is a gift when it helps a creature rest. It becomes a rival world when reality is treated mainly as the interruption.

8.9 Music, Movies, Profanity, Violence, and Sexual Content

Christians often seek a simple content rule because discernment is tiring. One community bans entire genres. Another relies on age ratings. Another says art is merely art and moral concern is prudish. Another counts swear words or seconds of nudity. Each approach can identify something useful, but none is sufficient. Art communicates through story, beauty, rhythm, symbol, perspective, identification, repetition, and emotional rehearsal. Its moral influence cannot be reduced to a checklist, yet refusing checklists does not make content morally weightless.

Scripture does not command believers to consume only explicitly Christian art. Paul can quote pagan poets in [Acts 17:28](#) and [Titus 1:12](#), and biblical writers know the surrounding cultural world. The Bible itself depicts murder, rape, war, betrayal, idolatry, sexual sin, and profanity without endorsing them. Therefore the mere presence of evil in a story cannot make the story evil. Moral depiction is not moral approval. A film may portray adultery in order to expose its destruction, while a superficially "clean" romantic story may quietly catechize viewers into self-worship, materialism, or emotional infidelity.

[Philippians 4:8](#) is frequently used as an entertainment filter: whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, morally excellent, and praiseworthy should occupy Christian thought. The verse is powerful, but it should not be used mechanically to mean believers may never encounter a depiction of ugliness. Paul himself writes about ugly realities. The point is the moral orientation of the mind. What do we linger on, celebrate, rehearse, admire, and allow to shape imagination? [Ephesians 5:3-12](#) similarly warns against obscenity, foolish talk, and participation in deeds of darkness while calling believers to expose rather than imitate them.

Profanity is a useful example. Scripture directly condemns corrupt, abusive, filthy, slanderous, and destructive speech ([Ephesians 4:29-31](#); [Colossians 3:8](#); [James 3:9-10](#)). But hearing a fictional character speak sinfully is not identical to speaking sinfully oneself. The Christian still asks whether repeated exposure normalizes language he once resisted, whether a song invites him to celebrate degradation, and whether entertainment becomes a rehearsal room for speech that later emerges from his own mouth. A legalistic count of words can miss moral tone; a dismissive "words are just words" can miss formation.

Violence requires similar distinctions. Scripture includes warfare and judgment, but it never treats cruelty as entertainment for its own sake. Some art depicts violence truthfully to show evil's cost, protect memory, or awaken moral seriousness. Other content aestheticizes torture, revenge, domination, or gore so that suffering becomes spectacle. The Christian question is not merely, "Was violence shown?" It is, "What am I being invited to feel about violence?" Am I grieving injustice, understanding courage, or learning history? Or am I consuming another person's imagined pain as stimulation?

Sexual content often requires stricter caution because Jesus locates sexual sin not only in physical acts but in lustful looking ([Matthew 5:27-30](#)). Chapter 7 addressed pornography directly; this chapter need not repeat that analysis. The relevant point is that entertainment can function pornographically even when it is marketed as mainstream art. A person who repeatedly chooses scenes because they sexually arouse, who rewinds nudity, seeks explicit series while denying pornography use, or uses artistic prestige as a shield for lust is not solving the moral problem through genre labels.

At the same time, the church should avoid making sensitive consciences afraid of accidental exposure. Seeing an image unexpectedly is not the same as choosing lust. A survivor who is triggered by a scene is not morally guilty for a trauma response. A believer who notices beauty has not automatically sinned. Temptation and consent remain distinct. Discernment should produce agency, not obsessive fear.

Music adds another complexity because lyrics are carried by memory and emotion. A song may be musically beautiful while its message celebrates promiscuity, revenge, self-deification, drug use, greed, or despair. Another song may describe those realities without praising them. Instrumental music does not become morally pure merely because it has no lyrics, nor does a genre become corrupt because of its cultural origin. Rock, rap, jazz, classical, electronic, traditional, and other genres cannot be assigned holiness by beat or instrumentation alone. Content, context, associations, use, and effect matter.

This is where old "pagan origin" arguments often fail. A musical instrument, festival practice, storytelling convention, or artistic form does not remain morally owned by every historical context in which it once appeared. Paul does not teach that meat becomes permanently demonic because it was once offered to an idol ([1 Corinthians 8:1-8](#)). He distinguishes the created thing from participation in idolatry. Chapter 14 will develop this framework more fully. Here the principle is enough: origins can provide relevant information, but origin alone does not settle present moral meaning.

The strongest defense of unrestricted artistic consumption appeals to maturity. Mature adults, it argues, can distinguish fiction from endorsement and are not transformed by every image they encounter. There is truth here. Christians should not infantilize themselves. Yet maturity is not proven by the ability to tolerate more corruption. Paul describes maturity as trained discernment and self-government. Sometimes maturity means engaging a difficult work thoughtfully. Sometimes maturity means recognizing that a certain work reliably awakens lust, despair, rage, or fascination in oneself and walking away without needing everyone else to share the same boundary.

A useful discernment framework asks several questions. What does this work present as beautiful, admirable, laughable, inevitable, or normal? With whom does it train me to identify? Does it tell the truth about consequences? What response does it repeatedly evoke in me? Am I consuming it because of excellence or because it gives socially acceptable access to content I would otherwise avoid? Can I watch or listen with thanksgiving before God? Would I defend the same choice if no one knew my taste? Am I becoming more capable of loving what God loves and hating what He hates, or am I simply becoming harder to shock?

No rating system can answer these questions for every conscience. Parents also have obligations that differ from adult liberty because children do not possess adult interpretive capacity. Age-appropriate safeguards are not fear but stewardship. Mature Christian households should be able to explain why content is permitted or refused without pretending that every family's boundary is a divine command for all.

8.10 Occult Entertainment and Spiritual Curiosity

Occult entertainment requires a distinction that Christian discussion often refuses to make. On one side, some believers treat every fictional witch, fantasy spell, mythological creature, supernatural story, Halloween decoration, or horror film as direct participation in demonism. On the other side, some Christians treat actual divination, spirit consultation, tarot, astrology, ritual magic, and occult experimentation as harmless aesthetics because they are culturally fashionable or practiced "for fun." Scripture supports neither indiscriminate panic nor indiscriminate permission.

The biblical prohibitions are clear where actual spiritual practices are concerned. Israel was forbidden to practice divination, sorcery, fortune-telling, omen reading, mediumship, necromancy, and consultation with the dead ([Deuteronomy 18:9-14](#)). Isaiah mocks the failure of astrologers to save Babylon ([Isaiah 47:12-15](#)). Manasseh's occult practices are included in the indictment against his rebellion ([2 Kings 21:1-6](#)). In the New Testament, converts at Ephesus publicly renounce magical

practices and destroy valuable books associated with them ([Acts 19:18-20](#)). Simon's attempt to purchase spiritual power is rebuked ([Acts 8:18-24](#)), and the slave girl's genuine supernatural knowledge does not cause Paul to welcome the spirit behind it ([Acts 16:16-18](#)). Scripture does not present forbidden spiritual access as a neutral tool whose morality depends only on intention.

This matters because occult practices are increasingly normalized through entertainment and wellness language. A 2025 Pew Research Center survey found that 30 percent of U.S. adults reported consulting astrology, tarot cards, or a fortune teller at least once or twice a year, with most saying they did so for fun rather than to guide major decisions (Pew Research Center, 2025). The finding is sociological and U.S.-specific, not a global spiritual census. It nevertheless captures a modern defense that Christians hear frequently: "I do not really believe it. It is just entertainment."

But amusement does not automatically neutralize the kind of act being performed. If Scripture prohibits seeking occult knowledge, the moral character of the practice is not transformed merely because the participant laughs while doing it. A person can lie as a joke and still lie. A person can simulate a séance as theater without intending spiritual contact, but a person who actually asks a medium, tarot reader, horoscope, pendulum, spirit board, or alleged guide for hidden knowledge has moved from depiction toward participation. The distinction is not whether the room is decorated playfully. It is what the person is actually doing.

The New Age movement has helped blur these boundaries by packaging spiritual practices through the language of intuition, energy, synchronicity, higher self, manifestation, angel numbers, crystals, spirit guides, chakras, energy healing, and wellness. These terms are not morally identical, and ordinary goal-setting, hopeful expectation, breathing exercises, or the possession of a physical object should not be condemned merely because a New Age teacher uses similar vocabulary. The issue is the metaphysical claim attached to the practice. The author's mature research on New Age spirituality rightly emphasizes that practices should be assessed by what they actually claim and do rather than by attractive branding, a concern consistent with scholarly mapping of modern self-spirituality and esotericism (Hanegraaff, 1996; Sangwa, 2026b). The so-called law of attraction or manifestation becomes a theological counterfeit when thought, speech, visualization, "frequency," or an allegedly divine self is treated as a causal spiritual force that summons desired outcomes from the universe. Biblical faith is not mental causation. Prayer addresses the sovereign personal God, submits desire to His will, and refuses to make the self the mechanism of providence ([Matthew 6:9-13](#); [James 4:13-16](#)). Christian discernment must therefore ask whether a practice attributes spiritual power, guidance, protection, healing, or revelation to a source Scripture does not authorize.

A serious rebuttal asks whether Christians over-spiritualize ordinary symbolism. Tarot cards, for example, are physical cards. Zodiac signs are astronomical patterns overlaid with cultural stories. A fictional spell is words written by a novelist. That observation is correct as far as material objects are concerned. Matter is not magically contaminated by shape or ink. The Christian concern is not that cardboard possesses an evil substance. It is that a person may use an object within a practice of divination or spiritual trust. Paul makes a comparable distinction in [1 Corinthians 8-10](#). An idol is nothing as a rival god, and food remains food, yet actual participation in idolatrous worship is incompatible with communion with Christ ([1 Corinthians 8:4-8](#); [1 Corinthians 10:14-22](#)). The object and the participation must not be confused.

Fiction therefore requires case-by-case discernment. The Bible contains symbolic beasts, dragons, sorcerers, demons, visions, and supernatural conflict. The mere depiction of magic cannot be equated with performing magic. Fantasy may use impossible powers as a narrative device to explore courage, sacrifice, temptation, or evil. A historical film may portray occult ritual in order to condemn it. A horror

story may expose the terror of evil or may merely exploit fear and fascination. The Christian question is what the work invites the audience to admire, practice, normalize, or desire.

Horror is especially difficult because people differ in vulnerability. One person may watch a serious film about evil and leave morally sober. Another may become fascinated with gore, demonic imagery, ritual material, or fear itself. Some trauma survivors may experience intrusive memories or dysregulation from content others tolerate easily. Conscience and psychological vulnerability matter. A mature believer does not prove courage by forcing himself to consume what repeatedly disturbs his spiritual or psychological stability.

There is also a temptation to explain every frightening experience with speculative demonology. Sleep paralysis, intrusive thoughts, trauma responses, psychosis, panic attacks, and other conditions can involve experiences that feel spiritually terrifying. Christians should pray and take spiritual warfare seriously, but they should not diagnose demons where competent medical or psychological assessment is needed. Scripture's supernatural worldview does not authorize reckless certainty about every symptom.

At the same time, modern clinical explanations do not require Christians to deny the spiritual realm. The New Testament calls believers to resist the devil, remain watchful, put on the armor of God, and test the spirits ([Ephesians 6:10-18](#); [James 4:7](#); [1 Peter 5:8-9](#); [1 John 4:1](#)). The biblical path avoids both superstition and materialistic reduction. It refuses invented techniques and refuses naïveté.

Pastoral repentance after occult involvement should be Christ-centered rather than sensational. The person does not need to become obsessed with tracing every object, family story, dream, or coincidence. [Acts 19](#) shows a decisive renunciation of magical practice, but the center of Christian freedom is not the ritual of destruction. It is allegiance to Jesus Christ. Confession, removal of materials actively used for divination, cessation of practices, prayer, accountable fellowship, and renewed immersion in Scripture may be appropriate. Where trauma, compulsion, or mental illness is involved, professional care may also be necessary. The believer's assurance rests in Christ's victory, not in perfect knowledge of the unseen world ([Colossians 2:13-15](#)).

The searching question is therefore twofold. Am I calling fiction participation when Scripture does not, thereby binding consciences? Or am I calling participation fiction because I do not want Scripture to interrupt my curiosity? Christian liberty does not include the liberty to seek forbidden spiritual access. Christian courage does include the freedom to refuse superstition.

8.11 Celebrity Culture and Parasocial Desire

Human beings have always admired public figures. Scripture itself remembers heroes of faith while carefully preserving their failures ([Hebrews 11:1-40](#); [James 5:17](#)). Teachers can be imitated insofar as they imitate Christ ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). Artists, athletes, scholars, leaders, and skilled workers can rightly be appreciated for excellence. The problem begins when admiration becomes devotion, imitation becomes identity, and a public figure occupies emotional space that belongs to real relationships, truth, or God.

Celebrity culture intensifies ordinary admiration because modern media creates an illusion of intimacy at scale. Followers see bedrooms, meals, marriages, workouts, tears, vacations, prayer routines, shopping choices, political opinions, and moments framed as spontaneous. The audience may know thousands of details about a person who does not know they exist. Scholars describe these one-sided emotional bonds as parasocial relationships or interactions. They are not automatically pathological. A 2026 systematic review and meta-analysis of parasocial engagement with social-media influencers found

associations with both positive and negative mental-health outcomes. The authors describe parasocial engagement as a psychological "double-edged sword" rather than uniformly harmful, with some associations involving well-being and others involving problematic use or distress (Li et al., 2026). This evidence is valuable precisely because it prevents a simplistic sermon in which all fandom is treated as disease.

The moral question is not whether a person has a favorite artist or admires an athlete. It is what the relationship is doing. Does the celebrity become a reference point for clothing, sexuality, politics, spirituality, diet, money, relationships, and self-worth? Does criticism of the figure feel like a personal attack? Is the follower spending money needed elsewhere to maintain proximity through merchandise, memberships, concerts, donations, subscriptions, or speculative "access"? Does the person's emotional life rise and fall with someone else's curated life?

The Bible's language of idolatry reaches beyond statues. Idolatry occurs whenever created reality receives trust, devotion, fear, obedience, or identity that belongs supremely to God ([Romans 1:22-25](#); [Colossians 3:5](#)). A celebrity can become an idol without the fan using religious vocabulary. The evidence is often visible in imitation. Paul warns the Corinthians against factional identity built around leaders: "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," and "I belong to Cephas" ([1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#); [1 Corinthians 3:4-7](#)). If apostolic teachers could become badges of belonging, modern personalities can do the same.

Christian celebrity culture is not exempt. A preacher, worship leader, apologist, prophet, podcast host, or Christian influencer can become a substitute conscience. Followers may accept teaching without testing it, defend misconduct because the ministry "changed my life," buy access to spiritual status, or interpret criticism as persecution. The transition to Chapter 10 is obvious, but this chapter's concern is the appetite beneath the technology: the desire to borrow significance from proximity to a celebrated person.

The strongest defense of fandom notes that public figures can inspire excellent action. A young athlete may train harder because of a role model. A reader may discover important books through a public intellectual. A believer may learn Scripture from a gifted teacher. Parasocial familiarity can even reduce loneliness for some people. These goods should be acknowledged. The alternative to celebrity idolatry is not cynicism toward excellence.

Yet inspiration should mature into principle rather than dependence on personality. Paul does not say, "Never imitate me." He says, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ" ([1 Corinthians 11:1](#)). The model is accountable to a higher standard. Christian admiration therefore includes the freedom to say, "This person is gifted and wrong here," "This ministry helped me and must still be investigated," or "This artist's work is excellent, but I do not need the artist's moral vision to define mine."

Celebrity desire can also expose loneliness. A person may know much about public figures because reciprocal relationships feel riskier. Parasocial bonds are predictable: the admired figure cannot demand chores, forgive slowly, confront sin, or ask for inconvenient service. Real church community can disappoint; the influencer can be switched off. Here the answer is not mockery. Loneliness is real, and some people need patient pathways back into embodied friendship. But a one-sided relationship cannot bear the weight of covenant community.

Parents should pay attention without ridiculing adolescents. Mockery usually deepens attachment by making the celebrity world feel safer than home. Better questions ask what the young person admires, what messages are being absorbed, what purchases are requested, how identity is being shaped, and whether admiration can be connected to discernment. The goal is not to create children who admire no one. It is to form people whose highest allegiance makes every lesser admiration proportionate.

For adults, the self-examination may be more embarrassing. Whose opinion can ruin my day? Whose lifestyle do I mentally inhabit? Whose success makes my own life feel small? Which public figure do I defend beyond evidence? How much of my money and attention serves people who will never know my name while people who do know my name receive leftovers? These questions expose appetite for borrowed glory.

Christ does not offer parasocial intimacy. He knows His sheep by name ([John 10:3](#), 14). The astonishing answer to celebrity hunger is not that Christians must become unimpressed by all human excellence. It is that the believer is already known by the King whose glory every human platform imitates and cannot sustain.

8.12 Food, Feasting, Fasting, and Gluttony

Food may be the clearest evidence that Christian holiness is not hostility to pleasure. God creates a world in which nourishment has taste, color, texture, aroma, season, and social meaning. Meals become sites of hospitality, covenant remembrance, celebration, reconciliation, and fellowship. Israel's calendar includes feasts. Jesus eats with others so often that His enemies accuse Him of being a glutton and a drunkard, an accusation Scripture does not endorse ([Matthew 11:18-19](#)). The risen Christ eats with His disciples ([Luke 24:41-43](#)). Christian hope culminates in banquet imagery ([Revelation 19:6-9](#)). A theology that makes pleasure in food inherently suspect is not biblical.

Yet food can also become master. Scripture warns against gluttony and against lives organized around appetite ([Proverbs 23:19-21](#); [Philippians 3:18-19](#)). The difficulty is that gluttony is frequently discussed with more cultural stereotype than exegesis. Some Christians assume body size reveals moral character. It does not. A thin person can be gluttonous, obsessive, vain, or disordered; a larger-bodied person can eat moderately, exercise wisely, and live with medical, genetic, medication-related, or environmental factors that affect weight. The World Health Organization now describes obesity as a chronic, relapsing disease arising from complex interactions among genetics, neurobiology, eating behavior, food access, market forces, and broader environment (World Health Organization, 2025). Medical complexity does not remove all moral agency around eating. It does forbid the lazy equation "larger body equals gluttony."

Gluttony is better understood as disordered appetite expressed through excess, preoccupation, refusal of self-control, waste, or using food in ways that displace love and stewardship. It can appear in compulsive overeating, but it can also appear in gourmet obsession, constant novelty-seeking, status dining, or an inability to tolerate ordinary food because consumption has become identity. Conversely, restrictive eating can also become disordered and dangerous. Chapter 6 addressed eating disorders more directly; the pastoral principle remains that anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating disorder, and related conditions require competent clinical care and must not be reduced to sermons about willpower.

Health guidance can help clarify without becoming law. The World Health Organization's 2026 healthy-diet framework emphasizes adequacy, balance, moderation, and diversity, while recognizing that healthy diets vary across cultures, availability, age, lifestyle, and individual conditions (World Health Organization, 2026b). Those categories are compatible with wisdom but should not be baptized as a biblical diet. Scripture does not command one modern nutritional pattern for all Christians. The believer can eat meat or abstain, follow a medically indicated diet, enjoy culturally specific foods, or make prudential health decisions without converting them into righteousness ([Romans 14:1-6](#); [1 Timothy 4:3-5](#)).

Comfort eating deserves compassion and honesty. Food is biologically and relationally comforting. A grieving person may eat differently. Stress affects appetite. Trauma and deprivation can reshape relationships with food. The problem is not that food gives comfort. The question is whether eating becomes the primary method for avoiding emotions, whether the pattern harms health or responsibility, and whether the person can receive help without shame. A prayer offered after overeating does not require self-contempt. It may require repentance, practical planning, medical assessment, counseling, or simply a return to ordinary meals without dramatic vows.

Luxury dining belongs at the edge of this chapter and the beginning of the next. Expensive food is not sinful merely because it is expensive. Scripture includes costly hospitality and celebration. But feasting becomes morally distorted when pleasure depends on display, waste, indifference to the poor, debt, or identity performance. Jesus' warning about the rich man and Lazarus is not a condemnation of flavor; it is an indictment of luxurious indifference at the gate ([Luke 16:19-31](#)). Chapter 9 will examine wealth and conspicuous consumption more fully.

Fasting provides a necessary counterpractice. Biblical fasting is voluntary abstinence from food for a spiritual purpose, often linked with prayer, mourning, repentance, seeking God, or concentrated dependence ([Ezra 8:21-23](#); [Matthew 6:16-18](#); [Acts 13:2-3](#)). Jesus assumes His disciples will fast but condemns fasting performed for human admiration ([Matthew 6:16-18](#)). Fasting does not purchase answers from God, manipulate spiritual power, detoxify sin, or make a person superior. It trains the body to remember that appetite is real but not ultimate.

This is where New Age and wellness cultures sometimes overlap superficially with Christian practices while carrying different meanings. "Fasting" may be marketed for manifestation, vibrational elevation, cosmic alignment, or purification of spiritual energy. Breathwork, dietary restriction, or cleansing regimens may be treated as technologies for accessing a higher self. Christians need not reject a practice merely because someone else attaches false beliefs to it, but they must not import the false beliefs. Biblical fasting is directed to the personal God, not to an impersonal universe, energy field, or latent divinity within the self.

Feasting and fasting together teach freedom. The person who cannot feast without guilt may be captive to legalism. The person who cannot fast without resentment may be captive to appetite. The gospel creates room for both gratitude and denial. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God" ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)). That verse is not a decorative prayer over excess. It is a claim over appetite.

A table can become an altar to self, but it can also become an altar of thanksgiving in the non-sacrificial sense of worshipful gratitude. The difference is not detected by calorie count alone. It appears in contentment, hospitality, self-control, generosity, health, freedom, and the ability to say both "thank You" and "enough."

8.13 Sleep, Laziness, Recreation, and Leisure

A pleasure-seeking culture can idolize leisure, but a productivity culture can despise it. Christians need correction in both directions. Some believers waste hours while duties decay and call it rest. Others carry exhaustion as a badge of faithfulness, sleep too little, neglect family, and treat chronic overwork as sacrifice for the kingdom. Both errors forget that humans are creatures with limits.

Sleep is not moral failure. God designed human beings to require it. [Psalm 127:2](#) rebukes anxious toil by saying God gives sleep to His beloved. Jesus sleeps in a boat during a storm after ministry ([Mark 4:35-](#)

40). Elijah, exhausted and despairing, is given sleep and food before further instruction ([1 Kings 19:4-8](#)). These texts do not provide a universal sleep prescription, but they show that bodily restoration can be divine mercy rather than spiritual softness.

Modern sleep science reinforces the need for humility. A major consensus recommendation from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and Sleep Research Society concluded that adults should generally sleep at least seven hours per night on a regular basis to promote optimal health, while recognizing individual variation and situations in which more sleep may be appropriate (Watson et al., 2015). Medical conditions, pregnancy, age, recovery from sleep deprivation, medication effects, disability, depression, shift work, caregiving, and many other factors complicate sleep. A pastor should not diagnose laziness by counting hours from a distance.

Scripture does condemn sloth. Proverbs portrays the sluggard as a person who loves sleep in a way that resists responsibility, invents excuses, neglects work, and allows preventable decay ([Proverbs 6:6-11](#); [Proverbs 24:30-34](#); [Proverbs 26:13-16](#)). The New Testament tells able members of the community who refuse responsible work not to exploit the generosity of others ([2 Thessalonians 3:10-12](#)). Sloth is not rest. It is avoidance of faithful responsibility.

That distinction protects people with illness from moral injury. Depression can involve fatigue and hypersomnia. Chronic illness can limit energy. Disability can make ordinary tasks costly. Trauma can disrupt sleep in both directions. A person recovering from surgery may sleep far more than usual. None of these realities should be interpreted casually as the vice of sloth. Biblical moral discernment asks about agency, capacity, responsibility, pattern, and heart rather than judging from appearance.

Recreation similarly belongs to creaturely life. The Bible does not command adults to maximize economic productivity. Sabbath establishes a rhythm in which cessation itself testifies that God sustains the world. Although Christians differ on the precise new-covenant application of Sabbath law, the theological truth of creaturely limitation remains. Rest can be an act of trust: the world continues while I sleep; Christ builds His church while I take a walk; my worth does not rise with every task completed.

The strongest defense of expansive leisure says that work-centered cultures have harmed people through burnout, family neglect, and identities built on achievement. This is true and will be examined further in Chapter 9. The corrective, however, is not a life organized around avoidance. Leisure becomes sloth when it systematically displaces obligations we are able and called to fulfill. A hobby that consumes the hours needed to care for children, complete honest work, serve others, manage a household, or keep commitments is not redeemed by the label "self-care."

"Self-care" itself requires discernment. The phrase can name legitimate stewardship: sleep, counseling, exercise, medical appointments, solitude, recreation, and boundaries that prevent exploitation. It can also become a moral shield for selfishness: refusing every inconvenient person, abandoning duties when emotions are unpleasant, or treating comfort as a right others must protect. Jesus withdrew to pray and rest, but He also allowed compassion to interrupt plans ([Mark 6:30-34](#)). Mature boundaries serve love; they do not abolish it.

Vacation and recreation raise similar questions. Travel can enlarge gratitude, strengthen family bonds, expose people to God's creation, and provide needed recovery. It can also become status display, escape from unresolved life, or debt-financed consumption, concerns Chapter 9 will address. The present test is whether leisure restores us to vocation or becomes an alternative to vocation.

There is an eschatological distortion at both extremes. The overworker behaves as if everything depends on him. The slothful person behaves as if nothing has been entrusted to him. Scripture teaches

both stewardship and rest because the servant works under a Master who is coming ([Matthew 24:45-51](#); [Matthew 25:14-30](#)). Readiness is not frantic activity. It is faithful activity.

The question for the exhausted believer may therefore be: Do I trust God enough to sleep? The question for the avoidant believer may be: Do I love God enough to get up? The same Lord can command one person to stop and another to begin. Holiness is not measured by visible busyness or visible relaxation. It is measured by faithful love within creaturely limits.

8.14 When a Good Gift Becomes a Master

The chapter can now return to its controlling problem. Alcohol is not the only potential master. Nicotine is not the only addictive appetite. Gambling is not the only form of greed. Gaming is not the only escape. Food is not the only comfort. Celebrity is not the only borrowed identity. Leisure is not the only avoidance. The human heart can turn almost any good gift into a rival lord because idolatry is less about the material of the idol than the allegiance of the worshiper.

Paul's language remains the clearest diagnostic: "I will not be mastered by anything" ([1 Corinthians 6:12](#)). Mastery is visible when a practice begins to issue commands. It says: You cannot relax until you drink. You cannot focus until you vape. You cannot enjoy the match until you bet. You cannot sleep until you stream another episode. You cannot face grief without pills. You cannot feel valuable unless a public figure or online community validates you. You cannot celebrate without excess. You cannot tolerate a quiet evening. You cannot imagine obeying Christ if obedience removes this pleasure.

The first test is therefore control. Can I stop? This is not an infallible test. A person can abstain temporarily and still be idolatrous, and medically necessary treatments should not be stopped merely to prove spiritual strength. For chemically or behaviorally dependent people, inability to stop may indicate a genuine disorder or entrenched bondage requiring professional care; it is not, by itself, proof that a person is unregenerate. Yet for optional pleasures, repeated inability to stop, intense preoccupation, concealment, escalating use, or disproportionate distress is a serious warning that freedom is being compromised. The pastoral response is neither shame nor denial. It is truth, repentance where sin is present, treatment where disorder is present, and concrete help toward restored self-government under Christ.

The second test is priority. What repeatedly gets first claim on money, time, attention, and emotional energy? Jesus says where treasure is, the heart follows ([Matthew 6:19-21](#)). A person may insist that God is first while practical life is organized around the next drink, wager, game, trip, meal, purchase, or celebrity update. Priority is not measured by religious language but by patterns of sacrifice.

The third test is secrecy. Darkness does not prove addiction, but secrecy frequently protects it. Hidden bottles, deleted betting histories, undisclosed purchases, secret accounts, concealed prescriptions, private viewing, falsified explanations, and defensiveness toward simple questions all signal that a practice may no longer live comfortably in truth. "Everyone who does evil hates the light" is a severe statement in [John 3:20](#), but the gospel's answer is not public humiliation. It is coming into the light because Christ receives repentant sinners ([John 3:21](#); [1 John 1:7-9](#)).

The fourth test is escalation. Does the pleasure require more time, money, intensity, novelty, or risk to produce the same satisfaction? Escalation is familiar in substance dependence, gambling, pornography, gaming, shopping, and entertainment, but it also appears in ordinary consumption. What once delighted becomes baseline. Appetite asks for stronger stimulation. The pattern reflects a spiritual truth

Ecclesiastes knew long before modern behavioral science: created pleasure cannot carry infinite demand ([Ecclesiastes 2:1-11](#)).

The fifth test is consequence. What is this pleasure costing? Sleep, health, money, honesty, marriage, attention to children, work quality, prayer, church fellowship, safety, or the ability to be present? The idol often survives because each cost is explained separately. "I am tired because of work." "We argue because my spouse is controlling." "I am broke because life is expensive." "I do not pray because I am busy." Sometimes those explanations are true. Sometimes the pattern has one master hiding behind many excuses.

The sixth test is emotional function. What feeling am I trying not to feel? Boredom, shame, loneliness, grief, fear, anger, inadequacy, trauma, or spiritual emptiness? Pleasure can become self-medication. This does not mean the underlying pain is imaginary. It means the chosen relief may be preventing truthful care. Some readers need repentance. Some need therapy. Some need medical treatment. Some need reconciliation. Some need sleep. Some need a friend. Many need several of these at once. The question is whether the pleasure is helping the person face reality faithfully or making escape the only tolerable state.

The seventh test is love of neighbor. Who pays for my pleasure? A child breathing smoke, a spouse carrying debt, a family absorbing gambling losses, coworkers covering neglected duties, viewers funding exploitative sexual content, a recovering friend drawn back toward a substance, or vulnerable people targeted by an industry's business model? Christian ethics asks not only what I feel but whom my freedom serves ([Romans 14:13-21](#); [1 Corinthians 10:24](#)). A further question can expose self-deception: would I still call this pattern harmless if my child, spouse, counselee, student, or a new believer learned to imitate it from me? Example does not make every private choice universally binding, but love refuses to ignore the discipleship effects of repeated conduct.

The eighth test is conscience. Can I do this from faith? Paul says whatever does not proceed from faith is sin in the [Romans 14](#) context ([Romans 14:23](#)). A believer who cannot participate with a clear conscience should not violate conscience merely to impress more permissive Christians. At the same time, conscience must be educated by Scripture. A conscience can be weak, misinformed, seared, or manipulated. "I feel fine about it" does not create righteousness, and "I feel guilty" does not necessarily create a command. Conscience needs truth.

The ninth test is thanksgiving. Can I genuinely thank God for this gift in its present form? Thanksgiving is not magic that sanctifies whatever we choose. Paul speaks of created goods received according to God's Word and prayer ([1 Timothy 4:4-5](#)). We cannot thank God for drunkenness, greed, occult divination, exploitation, or lust as though gratitude changes their moral nature. But where a practice is lawful, thanksgiving can expose whether we receive it as gift or demand it as entitlement.

The tenth test is surrender. If Christ, through Scripture, wisdom, love of neighbor, providential warning, medical necessity, or a rightly informed conscience made abstinence necessary, could I let the pleasure go? This question reaches beneath behavior to lordship. Abraham's faith was tested at the point of what he loved most ([Genesis 22:1-18](#)). Christians should not imitate that narrative by inventing dramatic sacrifices, but the spiritual principle is unavoidable: an idol is often revealed when surrender feels impossible.

These tests must not become a new legal code. The point is not to score ten out of ten and declare oneself regenerate. A scrupulous believer could turn them into another machinery of fear. They are diagnostic aids, not grounds of justification. Christ is the ground. The Spirit produces self-control. The church provides community. Wisdom applies truth to circumstance.

For people already mastered, the path back should be concrete. Naming the problem matters. Secrecy should be broken wisely. Access may need to be restricted. Money may need to be placed under joint accountability. Devices may need barriers. A clinician may need to evaluate substance dependence or mental health. A pastor may need to listen rather than lecture. Family members may need safeguarding. Restitution may be necessary. Withdrawal may require medical supervision. New routines and relationships may need to replace the old pattern. Recovery is not less spiritual because it has structure.

Relapse should be treated seriously without becoming a doctrine of hopelessness. A believer who falls should confess quickly rather than hiding because perfection has been lost. First John does not say Christians never sin; it says they must not make peace with darkness and points sinning believers to Jesus Christ the righteous Advocate ([1 John 1:8-2:2](#)). The decisive contrast is not between people who have never struggled and people who have. It is between darkness defended and darkness brought into the light.

Churches must also examine how they cultivate appetite. A congregation can preach against alcohol while building every gathering around spectacle. It can condemn gambling while fundraising through manipulative promises of financial return from God. It can preach fasting while idolizing platform growth. It can warn young people against games while pastors compulsively chase metrics. It can condemn celebrity culture while building celebrity ministries. Chapter 11 will address ecclesial deception more directly, but the principle already applies: the church cannot disciple people out of appetites it monetizes in religious form.

The final question of mastery is not "How much is too much?" Quantities matter in some cases, but lordship reaches deeper. The question is, "Whose servant am I becoming?" Jesus says no one can serve two masters ([Matthew 6:24](#)). Paul says believers have been freed from sin to become slaves of righteousness and servants of God ([Romans 6:16-22](#)). Christian freedom is not masterlessness. It is the joy of having the right Master.

Conclusion: From Lesser Pleasures to the Joy of a Better Master

The broad road does not always invite the church to deny Jesus. Sometimes it merely teaches Christians to remain perpetually entertained, mildly intoxicated, comfortably distracted, financially aroused, emotionally anesthetized, and spiritually sleepy while continuing to say, "Lord, Lord." That is why pleasure belongs inside a book about false assurance. The danger is not that Christians enjoy the world God made. The danger is that enjoyment becomes anesthesia against the voice of the God who made it.

This chapter has refused an easy list because Scripture gives something better than a list. It gives a Lord, a moral grammar, and a new heart. Drunkenness is explicitly condemned. Occult participation is explicitly condemned. Greed and gluttonous, slothful, dissipated living are condemned. Other practices require principle, wisdom, conscience, and love. Cigarettes and vaping must be tested through stewardship, harm, and mastery. Cannabis must be distinguished between responsible medical use and recreational intoxication. Prescription drugs must be distinguished between treatment and misuse. Gambling must be examined through greed, stewardship, exploitation, and bondage. Speculation must be distinguished from productive risk. Games, streaming, music, film, food, sleep, travel, and leisure can be gifts, but gifts can still become gods.

The chapter has also refused moral shortcuts. A person with an addiction is not merely a bad person who needs stronger shame. Dependence can involve powerful clinical, psychological, social, and bodily mechanisms. Treatment can be an instrument of grace. The person taking necessary medication is not

spiritually inferior. The exhausted person may need sleep rather than rebuke. The larger-bodied person cannot be diagnosed as gluttonous by sight. The gamer is not disordered because games are loved. The person who enjoys fiction containing supernatural elements is not automatically practicing occultism. The fan who admires an artist is not automatically idolatrous. Moral seriousness requires accurate distinctions because false accusation is itself sin.

But compassion cannot become reassurance for what Scripture calls bondage. If the drink controls you, do not call it liberty. If the bet consumes the rent, do not call it entertainment. If the drug exists to make sobriety intolerable, do not call it wellness. If the screen receives the attention your children beg for, do not call it rest. If the celebrity's opinion rules your conscience, do not call it inspiration. If food has become the only comfort you trust, do not call every warning body-shaming. If leisure is the place you hide from obedience, do not call it self-care. Words can become shelters for appetites. The Word of God tears the shelters open so grace can reach what euphemism protects.

For the self-righteous abstainer, the warning is equally sharp. You can be sober and lost. You can never smoke, never gamble, never use drugs, never watch a questionable film, fast regularly, eat carefully, wake early, and still trust yourself rather than Christ. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable fasted and tithed and went home unjustified because his confidence was in moral comparison ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). External restraint may be wise. It cannot bear guilt. The blood of Christ, not your clean lifestyle, is the sinner's plea.

For the struggling believer, this distinction is life-giving. Your craving is not your lord merely because it is loud. Your relapse is serious, but it is not stronger than Christ's advocacy when you come into the light. Your history does not make holiness impossible. You may need treatment, barriers, accountability, confession, a different circle of friends, financial safeguards, changed routines, medication, therapy, or long seasons of rebuilding. None of those actions earns the Father's love. They can be means through which a beloved child stops furnishing a room for the old master.

For the person who has never thought of pleasure as spiritual, the invitation is to notice what your habits are doing to your loves. Augustine famously understood sin as disordered love, and Scripture reaches the same reality in its own categories: people exchange God's glory for created things and become shaped by what they worship ([Romans 1:21-25](#)). Appetite is never merely about appetite. What we repeatedly reach for in fear, boredom, celebration, grief, and loneliness teaches the heart what salvation feels like.

This is also why self-control is not joylessness. Temptation often corrupts pleasure not by making the gift ugly but by severing gift from Giver and desire from obedience. God, by contrast, does not save us by flattening desire. He reorders it. The psalmist does not say there is no pleasure with God. He says, "In your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures" ([Psalm 16:11](#)). Jesus does not promise the thief a grey eternity of deprivation. He promises paradise ([Luke 23:43](#)). Revelation does not end with disembodied restraint. It ends with a wedding, a city, a river, a tree of life, and the face of God ([Revelation 19:6-9](#); [Revelation 22:1-5](#)). Holy joy is not the enemy of pleasure. It is pleasure restored to truth, gratitude, proportion, and worship.

The question, then, is not pleasure versus holiness. It is false pleasure versus holy joy, slavery versus freedom, anesthesia versus wakefulness, appetite as master versus Christ as Lord. Lesser pleasures become safest when they are truly lesser. A glass, a meal, a song, a game, a holiday, a story, a nap, a celebration, or a hobby can be received with open hands when the heart has a greater treasure.

Jesus' warning in [Matthew 7:13-23](#) still governs the book. Some will say "Lord" while practicing lawlessness. That warning should not make the repentant believer terrified of every cup of coffee or

evening of recreation. It should make all of us unwilling to hide settled bondage beneath Christian vocabulary. The narrow road is not a life without delight. It is a life in which delight has been brought under the reign of the One who leads to life.

And the One who leads to life is not merely an ethical principle. He is Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God. He bore the guilt of the greedy, drunkards, idolaters, the occult-involved, the self-indulgent, the self-righteous, and every other kind of sinner who comes to Him. Paul reminds the Corinthians that drunkards, the greedy, idolaters, thieves, the sexually immoral, and others had belonged to patterns incompatible with God's kingdom, and then announces the gospel's interruption: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" ([1 Corinthians 6:9-11](#)). The church must never preach the first half of that warning without the second, or the second without the first. Judgment is real; cleansing is real; Christ is sufficient.

Repentance therefore means more than feeling bad about excess. It means turning from the master to the Savior. Faith means more than believing Jesus can help control habits. It means entrusting oneself to the One who justifies the ungodly and raises the dead. Sanctification means the Spirit teaching the redeemed body to say yes and no in freedom. Assurance means looking first to Christ's finished work and then, without legalistic pride, recognizing the Spirit's war against masters that once ruled unchallenged.

The age says, "You deserve whatever gives relief." Legalism says, "You deserve God because you denied yourself." The gospel says neither. You deserve judgment, and Christ offers mercy. You cannot purchase Him by abstinence, and you cannot keep your idols as a condition of receiving Him. Come empty-handed. Come truthful. Come with the bottle, wager, screen, prescription, appetite, shame, fear, and secret named honestly. There is no need to negotiate with a better Master.

The Blessed Hope makes that freedom urgent. Titus joins grace, self-control, and the appearing of Christ in one movement: saving grace trains God's people to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age while waiting for "the blessed hope" ([Titus 2:11-14](#)). Readiness is not panic and not date-setting. It is a life becoming lighter because lesser masters are losing their claims. The Christian does not prepare for Christ's return by hating creation. He prepares by refusing to worship what is passing away.

So enjoy God's gifts with gratitude. Refuse what God forbids. Abstain where wisdom or love requires. Seek help where bondage has formed. Do not boast in your restraint. Do not hide behind your liberty. Do not let shame keep you in darkness. And do not ask a temporary pleasure to do what only Christ can do.

The world offers many ways to feel different for an hour. Jesus offers new life. The world sells escape. Jesus gives reconciliation. The world trains appetite to say "more." The Spirit teaches the heart to say, "Christ is enough," and then to receive every lesser gift in its proper place. That is not the death of pleasure. It is the beginning of freedom.

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