

Question: Isn't it a sin to smoke? If it's not, it ought to be. What would Jesus say about smoking?

When I was young, it seemed that there were as many Christians as non-Christians who smoked tobacco. Strong condemnation from the pulpit angered people and brought few changes in the number of smokers. Smokers generally argued that smoking had not been proven to be harmful to our health. Christians who smoked insisted that smoking was a matter of personal opinion and that preachers should stop meddling.

However, the second half of the twentieth century produced overwhelming evidence that tobacco causes cancer as well as lung and heart disease. Also, it is a major contributor to many other human diseases and illnesses. In more recent years, studies have demonstrated the highly-addictive nature of nicotine. Although many continue to smoke, I haven't heard anyone defend smoking in a long time.

Biblically speaking, there is no direct statement that says smoking is a sin. But this does not mean there are no spiritual principles that may apply to the practice. Many modern sins are not specified in the Bible, but God's eternal moral laws encompass principles that include them (For an example of how to interpret God's laws, see 1 Corinthians 9:9-12).

I believe Jesus would point out that the body of a Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit of God. The apostle Paul spoke of sexual immorality as sin committed against our bodies. He then explained: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; cf. 3:16-17). A Christian who willfully does harm to his body by smoking, sexual immorality or other harmful practices is dishonoring God's Holy Spirit that lives in him.

Even if smoking were not destructive to our bodies, a Christian should be concerned about the addictive nature of tobacco that enslaves smokers. The Bible says: "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). Smokers often claim they can quit anytime they want, but few quit without help because they are slaves to their addiction.

In addition, a Christian should be concerned about the kind of influence his or her smoking habit has on other people. Jesus commanded his followers to be “the salt of the earth” and “a light to the world” so as to bring glory to God (Matthew 6:14-16). A child of God is commanded, “In everything set them an example by doing what is good” (Titus 2:7). How can a parent influence his children for good and effectively teach them to stay free from harmful, habit-forming substances like alcohol and illegal drugs when he is himself addicted to nicotine?

Also, consider what Jesus taught about wise management of money and material things (Luke 12:13-21; 16:1-15, 19-31). Cigarettes are very expensive. Yet week after week I have witnessed individuals with the strong smell of tobacco smoke going to churches and asking for help with food and for money to pay their utility bills. They can’t buy food for themselves and their families, but they always manage to buy cigarettes.

In spite of these words in condemnation of smoking, I do have sympathy for those who are addicted to nicotine. I know that it is extremely difficult to break free from this habit. Thankfully, we have a God of grace who loves us and is willing to patiently work with us. I sincerely pray that my smoker friends will know that they are loved and that we pray for them often. I pray that they will seek the help of God and his guidance to find medical and psychological help to overcome this harmful addiction. I stand ready to pray with anyone, encourage them and help them in any way that I can. Please don’t give up on yourself or reject the loving concern of your Christians friends.

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