

# THINGS NOT SEEN

## EPISODE 1610 – DRUGS, MERCY, AND THE GOSPEL – REV. ALEXANDER SHARP

[On July 24, 2016, the Rev. Alexander Sharp appeared on *Things Not Seen*, a radio program hosted by David Dault. This transcript of the interview has been edited and condensed for brevity.]

*David Dault:* On today's show, a faith voice speaks out against the War on Drugs, calling for decriminalization, legalization, and harm reduction. We'll talk about all these concepts with Rev. Alexander Sharp.

The Rev. Alexander E. Sharp is the founder and executive director of Clergy for a New Drug Policy here in Chicago, Illinois, and has been working on criminal justice issues for 15 years. He served as the founding executive director of Protestants for the Common Good in Chicago, Illinois, from 1996 through June 2012. Rev. Sharp and a colleague, Walter Boyd, joined early efforts in Illinois to provide a second chance for those seeking to rebuild their lives after prison. Struck by how many, predominantly African-American and Hispanic, had been incarcerated for low-level drug offenses, they began to challenge the War on Drugs. Rev. Sharp has brought national models of diversion to public attention in Illinois and played a key role in the passage of medical marijuana in Illinois in 2012. We will be talking about his work to decriminalize drugs. You can find out more at the Clergy for a New Drug Policy website, [newdrugpolicy.org](http://newdrugpolicy.org).

Rev. Sharp, you are an ordained minister with a long career in public policy. What led you to focus on decriminalizing drugs?

*Sharp:* I'm concerned with the full spectrum of change in drug policy that takes us away from a "culture of punishment" towards a health model. That includes not just legalization, but also diversion, which simply means keeping people out of the criminal justice system who don't need to be there.

Police always have this option if someone is nonviolent, hasn't harmed others, and needs treatment mostly because they're cycling in and out of the criminal justice system. The police can refer them directly to what might help most, whether it's housing or counseling or other services. So, the broad answer is I'm concerned with changing how we respond to drug use.

I came to this view because in the late 1990s Walter Boyd and I were in Springfield, our state capital, advocating for second-chance programs for those coming out of prison. We saw how many people coming out of prison had been there, often with very long sentences, for nonviolent low-level drug possession. We became aware that the notion of a second chance for those who have been in prison, or in some cases simply arrested, is one of the great myths of American society. You can never really start over. We wanted to try to do something to change that.

Legislators were even more frightened about appearing to be soft on crime than they are now. Why are these folks in prison in the first place? That brings us to the War on Drugs, which over the last 45 years has done great damage to individuals and to society as a whole. Our faith calls us to forgiveness, but there is no forgiveness in our society for folks who have even the most

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minor drug offenses on their record and in many cases have gone to prison. We realized that we should be looking not at “re-entry” but at “no-entry.”

*Dault:* Many people might say those people are in prison because they’re bad people, they’ve done something wrong. How would you respond to that?

*Sharp:* Well, the first thing you have to say is that who’s in prison, especially for drug use, are primarily African-Americans and Hispanics from poor neighborhoods. So we are creating a vastly unequal society because of our drug laws.

As far as whether people are good or bad based on drug use, we’re learning a lot about addiction and what causes it. It’s not necessarily because people are immoral, or weak, or bad. Often they are “self-medicating,” turning to drugs in response to profound stress, even trauma. I came across a phrase from a public defender in Chicago, Amy Campanelli, that haunts me: “poverty crimes.” She talked about people who might sleep in churches, and to feed their family, or just to exist, they might steal a church offering. That’s a “poverty crime.” Those aren’t, in my definition, bad people. Those are people struggling to survive. So this question of who is bad is a very complex question that I think the gospel has a lot to say about.

*Dault:* A moment ago you used the term “self-medicating.” I wonder if you could explain what it means?

*Sharp:* “Self-medicating” means that you’re trying to make yourself feel better through artificial means—in the case of drugs, with substances from outside your physiology. We all do it in different ways; sex, gambling, and other behaviors can be another form of escape. Often self-medicating can be the path to addiction. We didn’t know in the 1980s and 1990s that it is not just opioids that lead to addiction. Many things fall into the category of “easing the pain.”

*Dault:* You talked about how an addiction can be gambling, or eating, or drugs. That begins to get at the pushback that you might get, particularly from the evangelicals, on the language of addiction as a disease versus addiction as a moral failing. When people say, “No, this is a character flaw. These people need to get inner strength and bring themselves upright again,” how would you as a pastor respond?

*Sharp:* Very often, in fact in most cases, it’s not a moral failing. If you’re talking about the fundamentalists, the extreme religious right, or evangelicals, there’s a notion, sometimes subconscious, sometimes explicit, that our purpose in this world is to gain salvation in the next. And the way you do that is by not straying from the moral path, defined as the “flesh versus the spirit.” One constantly has to be alert and upright, and using drugs is one of those things one doesn’t do, otherwise one is a sinner.

Plenty of people believe that; over 25 percent of this country is evangelical. But I don’t think that is what our faith is about and what the Gospel calls us to. You can argue that heaven and hell are real in this world and that we achieve salvation or we understand God’s love by giving to others here and now. This is a different paradigm than focusing on the next world. And if we focus on showing God’s love in this world, I think the notion that drugs are intrinsically sinful simply doesn’t hold water. That isn’t how we should view them.

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My second point is that when people turn to drugs, it's not necessarily out of moral weakness. It is always the hope that one has a choice, but many people who become addicts probably didn't have a choice in any practical sense. The single closest correlation between addiction and initial drug use is trauma, often from childhood, or a life of extreme stress. If that's true, to call the victims of trauma who turn to drugs weak and immoral is both judgmental and simply not accurate.

*Dault:* Help us understand the current criminal justice regime. For low-level drug offenses, people can go to jail for vast amounts of time. How did that come to be?

*Sharp:* It came to be through the creation of the War on Drugs. As a general matter, I don't try to turn what I'm saying and doing into politics, but the War on Drugs started in 1971 because President Nixon and his advisers devised a Southern strategy to gain re-election. They wanted to bring crime and race together in the eyes of the American public, so they created the War on Drugs. President Nixon even had a high-level commission to recommend what the policy on marijuana should be. The commission said that marijuana should not be illegal—it should be either decriminalized or legal. President Nixon deep-sixed that recommendation because it's not what he wanted to hear, and he created what we now know as the War on Drugs.

*Dault:* And when we talk about the War on Drugs, we're talking about a militarization of the police force, aren't we?

*Sharp:* That's certainly part of it. Drug use and drug policy were not on people's minds in 1980 when President Reagan ramped up the War on Drugs by increasing federal expenditures. This is a man who said government should be small, but he expanded government dramatically in this area. Federal spending on drug enforcement grew tenfold, combined with very tough sentencing laws, major increases in spending at all levels on enforcement, and vast amounts of money spent publicizing the evils of drug use. Then, as you point out, in the mid-80s came the militarization of the police, which now is perpetuated because departments' budget increases are based on the number of drug arrests they make.

*Dault:* My mother was an alcoholic and had a substance dependency. I'm still dealing with a lot of fallout, as a person in my mid-40s who's now raising children of my own. I'm one of the people you need to convince that your approach is the right one. What do you say when someone says, "I've seen the harm that these things do. Why would we want to let people do this to themselves?"

*Sharp:* My best response is that punishment is not the answer. If individuals are troubled, or reaching out, to label them as criminals is not going to deter them. The proper response is what I see in the Gospel: compassion, mercy, honest listening, respect, and the possibility of treatment if it is available. But to criminalize people is not the answer.

I think the heart of your question, what makes you uneasy, is a notion that if a substance is legal, more people will abuse it. I would argue that education, public campaigns, various responses other than punishment are much more likely to affect what a person does or doesn't do, so I don't think that prohibition—as we saw with alcohol—is the answer.

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But when we talk about legalizing or decriminalizing drugs, we are not saying, “Just go out there and make stuff available on every streetcorner.” We’re talking about taxing and regulating, so you can control what kinds of substances are available and where. If everything is prohibited, everything becomes part of a black market. I would argue that an alcoholic probably would have obtained alcohol somehow, in dangerous circumstances and of uncontrolled quality, so prohibition does much more harm than good. Our best response as a society has to start with understanding why a person is inclined to become an addict in the first place.

*Dault:* When a family member has an addiction, often they distort the entire family around the addiction. I think that some people who want a regime of punishment may be law-and-order types, but others may be looking for the justice they feel they lost in their family situation. How do you speak to that rage for order in families that have been broken by addiction?

*Sharp:* I think those who were affected by a family constellation of addiction need the same kind of compassion and mercy and understanding and God’s grace that addicts themselves need. They are victims of addiction, too.

*Dault:* You went to Gospel language. How does that language of grace and healing translate into public policy?

*Sharp:* One doesn’t have to be for marijuana use to be for legalization. It’s turning individuals into criminals by declaring something illegal that does so much damage. That’s a whole different question than what the church teaches about the possible dangers of drug use and the need to abstain from drug use. It seems to me that with the War on Drugs we have badly blurred what should be separate spheres by using the state to impose what churches can teach. As we reach out to different faith perspectives, including Islam, I’m learning more and more that we can’t legislate morality. Simply passing laws is not going to change behavior, especially when it comes to drugs.

My reference to Islam is important because, as you probably know, Muslims abstain from using drugs or alcohol. Yet I have two “Faith Voices” pieces on our website in which Islamic authors condemn the War on Drugs. You can’t live by laws that enforce morality. It’s not going to happen that way. You change behavior by community coming together, not because the law dictates what its members should do.

*Dault:* Throughout this conversation you’ve been using two terms, *legalization* and *decriminalization*. Could you explain the difference?

*Sharp:* It’s the difference between criminal and civil law. Criminal law says something is illegal, and you will be processed through the criminal justice system. That brands you for life. Decriminalization says that the offense is punishable by a fine, in the same way that you might pay a fine for a traffic violation.

*Dault:* And right now drugs are scheduled under criminal law?

*Sharp:* That’s correct.

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*Dault:* So your first step would be to change that criminal characterization and instead think about it in the same way that we think about traffic offenses.

*Sharp:* Yes. That has happened in 17 out of the 50 states. To go back to medical marijuana, over half of the population in this country now lives in states where medical marijuana is legal. Seventeen states have decriminalized marijuana. A law that would decriminalize marijuana in Illinois is currently pending in the Illinois house and has gone to the Illinois senate. That law passed last year, and Governor Bruce Rauner—in a not very standup way—issued a mandatory veto. He increased the fine from \$100 to \$200, which for poor people is pretty tough, and reduced slightly the amount of marijuana one can possess. He announced those changes without notice on a Friday afternoon, so the proponents had to start over again, which we're now doing.

*Dault:* Do you have any data about what the effects have been in those states?

*Sharp:* I don't have those figures in my head for the 17 states, but I will say two things. One has to do with medical marijuana, where the fear was that if you had something on grandmother's shelf to ease her pain, kids would see that as a sign of approval and might even use it. Uniformly, it is clear that teenage use of marijuana has not increased in states that have legalized medical marijuana.

The country of Portugal in 2001 decriminalized, not legalized, but decriminalized, not just marijuana but all drugs. They have something called dissuasion commissions, where a doctor, a lawyer, and a social worker together review cases that come before them referred by the police. They determine whether the use is fundamentally recreational, in which case they may impose a small fine. That takes care of 90 percent of the cases. The remaining 10 percent are referred to treatment. It's not mandatory treatment, but individuals have the possibility of treatment. In Portugal, drug use has not increased, and crime has not increased. And we're talking not just about marijuana, but about all drugs. So the data is available. My experience concerning change in these areas, especially with marijuana and other drugs, is that everybody predicts the sky will fall, and it doesn't happen. The dire predictions prove not to be real.

*Dault:* There's another term, and that's the concept of harm reduction. I wonder if you might tell our listeners about that.

*Sharp:* Harm reduction addresses head-on the notion that the only response to drug use should be insisting on abstinence, as Alcoholics Anonymous does. Harm reduction says that there is going to be drug use and drug users, and our responsibility, using Gospel terms, is to act with mercy, compassion, and basic human decency to reduce the harm for people who use drugs.

Let me give an example: an individual I admire, the Rev. Dr. Edwin Sanders of Metropolitan Church in Nashville, Tennessee. In the middle to late '80s during the AIDS epidemic, he started going into neighborhoods in Nashville where people were injecting drugs and would provide them with clean needles. People asked him, "How can you do that?" He said, "I can't save the souls of people who are dead."

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The underlying principle was, “Every life is worth saving.” That’s what we are practicing with harm reduction. The Gospel tells us Jesus cared most about those who lived on the margins. He didn’t punish them, he didn’t brand them as criminals. Harm reduction recognizes the reality that drugs exist, that some will turn to them, and that our key human response is to see the divine in each person and to meet them where they are.

*Dault:* As you have been engaged in this work for the last year, how has it affected your own spiritual life?

*Sharp:* It drives my work, because I don’t believe in a God of punishment, I don’t believe in a God who condemns people for moral weakness as much as a God who reaches out to them with mercy, forgiveness, and compassion. Those words can be overused. But this work has deepened my understanding of the Good News of the Gospel. It’s enriched my vision of who and what Jesus was, and is, today.

Let me tell you what I saw in Vancouver with harm reduction folks there. They were actually helping people to inject drugs, under medical supervision but with the drugs that they had brought to the facility. They were saving their lives. They were responding to people where they were. They were living the notion that we should care about people on the margin. They weren’t condoning use, but they also weren’t judging use. In their acceptance, their sense of caring, their compassion, and in walking by the side of these people in need, they were actually in many cases saving them—they were saving their lives. People weren’t dying of overdoses. They weren’t becoming infected by dirty needles. Miraculously, some folks who perhaps would have been on the street forever did seek treatment. So spiritually, seeing this has enriched my sense of who Jesus is and what the Gospel means. What I saw in Vancouver was a commitment, a level of joy and faith in what they were doing, that it is hard to describe.

*Dault:* Help me see how you are going to get churches to sign on to this. What are your strategies for bringing this message into a church and having it be heard?

*Sharp:* I would go back to what we’ve said about whether drug use is a function of sin and weakness, in which case one says, “Abstain; only then will you be a good person.” I doubt very much that saying, “You’re a sinner, and you’re weak, and you’ve got to abstain,” would be the most constructive response. In no way do I think this would change why that person had turned to drugs. I would talk to them about real people struggling with addiction and say, “Do you really want to say that Jesus would view those who are suffering from addiction or on the path to abusing drugs as necessarily weak and sinful? Or are there other deeper causes which he probably would recognize more deeply than we ever could?”

There are two reasons why clergy are becoming more involved in drug policy and why they had not been more involved up until now. African-Americans saw the ravages of drug use in their communities, and their response was often to want more police to take care of the traffickers. I certainly don’t argue with that. But what they didn’t see is what the drug laws themselves were doing to individuals in their community, where being stopped for a small amount of marijuana would lead to an arrest. This means that if you’re convicted, you might not be able to get food stamps, you might be banned from public housing, separated from your family. I think the African-American community is realizing that the drug laws can do as much or more damage



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than drug abuse itself. We are all against trafficking. Legalization, at least of marijuana, takes away some of the evil of trafficking, allows you to regulate what is available, and undercuts the black market.

In white communities, we never had to deal seriously with the War on Drugs because usually we have the ability to protect our kids, to find a lawyer, to locate and pay for treatment. So white suburban communities and the clergy there have gotten a pass on the War on Drugs. We must appeal to their social conscience in terms of responding to the War on Drugs. My answer would be to say, “Don’t be so fast to say that drug use is a function of sin and weakness.”

*Dault:* You launched Clergy for a New Drug Policy about 18 months ago. What has the response been from clergy and from laypersons?

*Sharp:* It’s been almost uniformly positive. Let’s take marijuana. So much time is spent enforcing marijuana laws. Public debate focuses on marijuana laws, the far deeper problems of the harder drugs have not been focused on in the same way, although that’s changing now with the opioid epidemic.

It’s hard to find even the first clergy person who says, “No, I don’t support medical marijuana.” It’s an act of compassion to support medical marijuana. People increasingly understand that marijuana helps people with the kind of chronic pain that you and I cannot really understand unless we’ve experienced it. So, as I’ve recruited support for medical marijuana in Illinois and Pennsylvania, clergy almost uniformly said, “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

When it comes to decriminalization, I find very much the same thing. I didn’t have any difficulty getting 15 people to a press conference in Chicago this past year to support a law decriminalizing marijuana in Illinois, because clergy pretty much understand that one shouldn’t be a criminal for possessing a small amount of marijuana. I’m not talking about trafficking, I’m talking about low-level possession.

Legalization is harder, because it implies a sanction and approval of marijuana use. It’s important to recall that pro legalization doesn’t mean pro marijuana. Making something illegal has all sorts of negative consequences that do more harm than good. What are those in the case of marijuana? First of all, we’re all concerned about our youth, right? We don’t want them going into alleyways to buy marijuana, which is very much available from people who can sell them bad stuff that could really hurt them. And it would put them in contact people who would be very happy to sell them other drugs as well. They don’t ask for an ID when they sell marijuana to youth. So the black market is a serious issue. Safety is an issue. Again, legalizing something doesn’t mean that you go out and preach that everybody should use it. But taxing and regulating, and using the revenue for educational programs, is a much sounder way to protect our youth.

*Dault:* So you had some good response to your website. Has there been pushback from religious leaders or from law enforcement professionals?

*Sharp:* Law enforcement pushback is always there, because that’s how they’ve been trained. But that doesn’t have to be the case. Attitudes can change, even among law enforcement. I just

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came back from Vancouver, Canada, where harm reduction is a major activity. I talked to the police chief in the part of Vancouver where harm reduction is the practice. They don't arrest drug users. They try to minimize the harm of their using. It was extraordinary. The police chief said, "We understand very often these folks are victims in a real, literal sense"—certainly as victims of trauma and stress and abuse, which I think is what leads to the deepest forms of addiction. He said, "Furthermore, it's not so surprising that we would respond in this way, because we're been trained in this response in our police academy experiences."

I couldn't believe it because I'm so used to law enforcement in this country reflexively saying that arrests for the lowest level of a drug use is the way we ought to be responding. So, even law enforcement attitudes can change, and you know what? It's very important to realize that as the opioid epidemic, the heroin epidemic, currently ravages our society, especially in New England, law enforcement response is changing. Last March, when several people in Gloucester, Massachusetts had died in a short period of time of heroin overdose, the police chief of Gloucester put out on Facebook the promise that if people came in to his department and turned over their [drug] paraphernalia, he would not arrest them. He would steer them to treatment. You know that never happened with the African-American community, in all the years that drug use ravaged their communities. But it began to happen when white folks were being affected. Even in the Chicago metropolitan area, in Mundelein, the police chief is doing very much the same thing. Other communities here are doing it. So law enforcement attitudes can change.

An organization that I work very closely with is called Law Enforcement Against Prohibition. These are police officers who individually have walked the road that Paul did on the road to the Damascus. The Executive Director, Neil Franklin, who is a friend, talks about his years as a police officer in Baltimore and doing raids and some cases, literally destroying people's property in order to save them. He woke up one day and said, "I'm doing more harm than good." So, yes, there is pushback from law enforcement, but a growing number of law enforcement officers are saying prohibition is not the answer.

*Dault:* What is frustrating you around these issues the most?

*Sharp:* That's a very good question. I start with the assumption that there aren't fast and easy answers. So my frustration is defused by the fact that I've been doing this for a long time, and I actually do see change. When Walter Boyd and I started in the late 1990s, we'd go down to Springfield and talk to legislators. They couldn't throw us out of their offices fast enough because they didn't want to appear soft on crime. Now, the governor of Illinois has a commission to reduce incarceration 25 percent over the next ten years.

What frustrates me the most is the hypocrisy I see. It's the thing that made Jesus angry more than anything else. He didn't like it when the Scribes and the Pharisees would adhere to the letter as opposed to the spirit of the law. He brought a new message, "I come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it."



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I remember sitting across from a person whom I respect, a former head of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Washington, DC. We were talking about illegal substances, especially marijuana. As he had his second martini, I thought, there's something wrong with this picture. I'm not against alcohol, but I am saying, "Let's look clearly at what it is that we're doing, and the way we judge others without looking at ourselves."

*Dault:* Throughout this conversation, you've said in a couple of explicit ways that we're not talking about rehabilitation, we're talking about redemption, about bringing a person back into community and belonging. Have I heard that correctly?

*Sharp:* That's absolutely right. The most profound and, I believe, accurate definition of addiction that I've heard is separation, loneliness, isolation. Where do you turn for help? Do you turn to something artificial to ease what you are struggling with? It seems to me that the goal is try to restore one to wholeness. That means dealing with the isolation, the loneliness, the separation that most profoundly has caused the addiction. You don't rehabilitate someone out of that as much as you address the deepest needs in their life. Jesus said, I came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly. It puzzles me: if Christians really believed the Gospel, we would be 10 times as joyous as we are. If we really believe that God loves every hair on our head, caring about everything that happens to us, we would be so filled with joy that we wouldn't be able to contain ourselves. When I think of people who are isolated and alone, their lives have been steered in a direction that makes it almost impossible for them to be open to that. But if the Gospel is true, as I believe it is, our responsibility is to bring that Gospel, that Good News of God's love, to people so that they do feel whole and they do sense that love. If we do this, addiction would be far less prevalent than it is today.

*Dault:* Rev. Alexander Sharp, I always enjoy talking to you and I'm very thankful that you've taking the time to tell us about your work today at Clergy for a New Drug Policy here in Chicago.

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