

Alcohol according to the Bible

SUMMARY: The Scriptures teach us that alcohol in and of itself is not a sinful or evil thing. Instead, the Scriptures tell us God has given us alcoholic beverages for our joy and our benefit. Yet man is guilty of taking good things given to us by God, like alcoholic beverages, and sinfully abusing them. In the end, all of us are accountable to God for our actions, and all of our actions must spring forth from faith. For some, faith will lead to affirming alcohol as a good gift from God, but choosing personally not to electively consume alcohol. For others, it will lead to enjoying alcoholic beverages in God-honoring moderation. Regardless of one's convictions, the power of the gospel releases us from bondage to anything or anyone, so in freedom, we can choose to partake or not partake for the glory of God.

What the Bible says concerning alcohol

Within the pages of Scripture, alcohol is considered to be a gift of God that offers benefits and is meant to be enjoyed rightly.

Psalms 104:15 [God makes] ...wine to gladden the heart of man...

Deuteronomy 14:26 "...spend the money for whatever you desire-- oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household."

Ecclesiastes 9:7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Proverbs 3:9-10 (NIV) Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

Isaiah 25:6 On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

1 Timothy 5:23 (NIV) Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.

In **John 2:1-11**, we read that Jesus' first miracle on earth was to turn water into wine¹ so the wedding party in Cana could continue.

In **Luke 7:33-34**, Jesus ate enough food and drank enough alcohol to be accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.² Certainly the motives and accuracy of such accusations were incorrect in that Jesus, being without sin, would not have taken food or drink to excess. But we see in this, along with other biblical testimony, that our perfect Lord Jesus did, in fact, drink alcohol.

At the same time, the Bible clearly **prohibits drunkenness**.

Luke 21:34 "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap."

Romans 13:13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.

Ephesians 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit

Sins that are associated with drunkenness include the following: **incest** (Genesis 19:32-35), **violence** (Proverbs 4:17), **adultery** (Revelation 17:2), **mockery and brawling** (Proverbs 20:1), **poverty** (Proverbs 21:17), **failed leadership** (Proverbs 31:4-5), **late night and early morning drinking** (Isaiah 5:11-12), **hallucinations** (Isaiah 28:7), **legendary antics** (Isaiah 5:22), **murder** (2 Samuel 11:13), **gluttony and poverty** (Proverbs 23:20-21), **vomiting** (Jeremiah 25:27, 48:26; Isaiah 19:14), **staggering** (Jeremiah 25:27; Psalm 107:27; Job 12:25), **madness** (Jeremiah 51:7), **nakedness** (Habakkuk 2:15; Lam. 4:21), **inattention** (Joel 1:5), **escapism** (Hosea 4:11), **depression** (Luke 21:34), and **staying up all night** (1 Thessalonians 5:7).

The sin of drunkenness often leads to other sins like the ones listed above. By honoring God and avoiding the sin of drunkenness, we don't give way to subsequent sins stemming from drunkenness. This is an important clarity, because we must not conclude that drinking alcohol in moderation leads to sins like these. Sin begets sin, but properly enjoying a good gift of God does not.

Three common positions concerning alcohol

There are basically three modern positions on the topic of alcohol consumption: prohibition, abstinence, and moderation. One of the purposes of this article is to bring clarity that two of these modern positions are unbiblical and to help bring a right and restored understanding to what the Bible says about drinking alcohol.

Prohibition: Alcohol is evil and all drinking is sin (unbiblical).

Abstinence: Alcohol is not evil, and drinking is not sinful, but all Christians should, nonetheless, refrain (unbiblical).

Moderation: Drinking alcohol is not sinful, drunkenness is sinful, and conscience and witness should influence how one exercises one's freedom to partake or not (biblical).

The problem with the prohibitionist position

Prohibition: Alcohol is evil and all drinking is sin (unbiblical).

During the turn of the 20th century, with the temperance movement in the U.S., some churches began to condemn alcohol as sinful. Since then, people influenced by teetotaling traditions simply assume that consuming any alcohol is sinful without really considering the entirety of what the Bible says on the issue. Rather, their practice is to select a few verses against drunkenness and declare this means alcohol consumption on any level is sinful somehow. To build their case, some prohibitionists will ignorantly argue Bible references that shed a positive light on the consumption of wine refer only to non-alcoholic wine.³

From the pages of Scripture, we find that the position of prohibition is untenable and not reflective of the text. In direct opposition to the prohibitionist position, Martin Luther once said it well: "Do you suppose that abuses are eliminated by destroying the object which is abused? Men can go wrong with wine and women. Shall we then prohibit and abolish women?"

From the whole of Scripture, we never read a single command which universally prohibits drinking. Select groups (Levites, Nazirites, etc.⁴) were restricted from partaking of specific beverages, but those limits are not equally applicable to all believers.⁵ For example, the Nazirites were also prohibited from eating dried grapes; should contemporary Christians consequently refrain from raisin consumption?

Alcohol itself is not inherently the problem or evil

Certainly, we recognize that drunkenness and addiction to anything are serious sins that lead to regrettable, evil, and destructive consequences.⁶ However, the very real fact that some will abuse the freedom does not mean that we should, therefore, strip all people of this liberty. Does the fact that some abuse the gift of sex lead us to a position of marital celibacy? Does the sin of gluttony⁷ lead us to purposed starvation? Of course not; rather, we recognize the biblical limits which God has placed upon the things He has entrusted to us to enjoy and freely steward within His appointed boundaries. Like food, alcohol was created by God to be enjoyed rightly by His creatures.⁸ It is never to become an ultimate affection or addiction that causes one to value it more than God or others. It can be used as an element in worship, celebration, thanksgiving, and fellowship, all of which are appropriate and God-honoring responses of the believer. Furthermore, science has evidenced and Scripture implies that moderate alcohol consumption can even have medicinal value.⁹

The Bible teaches that God gave wine to His people, even though they used it to worship the false pagan god Baal (Hosea 2:8). Jesus drank alcohol, even though there were undoubtedly people in His day who abused it (Matthew 11:19). Paul says that only a demon would compel Bible teachers to forbid things that God made good (1 Timothy 4:1-5), and drinking alcohol can be done in a way that glorifies God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The problem with the abstentionist position

Abstention: Alcohol is not evil and drinking is not sinful, but all Christians should, nonetheless, refrain (unbiblical).

Some have rightly understood that the Bible is clear not to declare drinking alcohol sinful, but they have still chosen to add culture or personal authority to declare that loving Christians should not drink alcohol as a way to avoid falling into or causing another to fall into sin. The problem with this position is it, too, undermines Scripture by adding legalistic boundaries—going beyond what God has said in His word.

In Paul's epistles, while continuing to condemn drunkenness, he articulates a theology of freedom of conscience. This is especially seen in 1 Corinthians 10 and Romans 14. Understanding Paul's theology of freedom will help guide our interpretation of the issue.

1 Corinthians 10:29-31 (NASB) I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Overall, the Bible reveals that each individual is subject to a renewed spiritual conscience and is responsible to God for his/her own actions. We are not governed by the consciences of others,¹⁰ but we are bound by the will of our beloved Lord instead. To look down on or deny another believer's ability to act in accordance with a God-honoring conscience is the essence of legalism and a denial of the very freedom for which he/she was saved.¹¹

No one can impose more strict standards than Scripture commands upon another believer. If an individual is convicted by his/her own drinking, he or she must not impose his or her conviction upon another. To do so is similar to the Pharisaical practice of legalism, valuing and exalting personal experience, traditions and interpretation over the actual authority of the biblical text.

Romans 14:3-4,10,13 (NASB) The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

The biblical position of moderation

Moderation: Drinking alcohol is not sinful, drunkenness is sinful, and conscience and witness should influence how one exercises one's freedom to partake or not (biblical).

Because God gave alcoholic beverages as a good gift, and the Scriptures are clear that there are many ways we can enjoy them in a God-honoring way, we should have no biblical restriction or resistance to do so in moderation. The power of the gospel at work in us can and should make way for anyone to enjoy the good gifts of God. We are not bound by sin anymore and therefore not mastered by it any longer. In Christ, we have the power and freedom to enjoy His good gifts and the desire to exercise that liberty in such a way that doesn't reasonably cause someone we know to stumble.

The Scriptures instruct us that if a believer finds himself in a situation in which the exercise of his freedom would cause another brother whom he knows to stumble, then he must restrict himself out of Christ-like love for the brother. For example, we would often be wise to refrain from elective alcohol consumption in the presence of someone we know to be struggling with drinking in a God-honoring way and therefore would be negatively impacted by our consumption. We must be careful not to allow our freedom to persuade others into sin. Recognizing our right and yet denying it for the good of others glorifies God.

1 Corinthians 6:12 (NASB) All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.

Romans 14:15,21 (NASB) For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

Some will take this too far and say it is permissible to drink in moderation in the privacy of your home but not in public, because you never know who you might cause to stumble. If this is truly God's expectation of us, then applied to other areas of life (i.e. entertainment, food, driving, spending money, etc.), Christians would no longer be able to rightly do many everyday things in public because people struggle with overuse or abuse of these areas of life. Instead, Christians should avoid causing an actual person they know who struggles to stumble. To seek to avoid causing any random person who possibly struggles to stumble is unreasonable, if not impossible, when applied to every single issue with which people struggle. Jesus and the disciples often modeled drinking alcohol in public settings, and our Lord commissioned the church to practice the Lord's Supper with wine, which is also not done in private. To create a standard different than what our good Lord modeled and instructed is to add a rule beyond what God intended for us.

Choosing not to partake in elective drinking of alcohol can be a God-honoring practice as long as it is not for legalistic or other unbiblical reasons.

Some people will find that they struggle to worshipfully and properly partake only in moderation (such as an inability to have godly self-control to limit the amount of alcohol consumed or poor judgment on when to consume alcohol) and will, therefore, be led toward a position of personally abstaining from elective partaking. Others may find that elective consumption, within the confines of their unique present circumstance, is undesirable based on personal preference (such as not enjoying the flavor of alcohol) and choose to not drink alcohol. Others determine rightly that consuming alcohol in a given situation would result in a compromised witness and will, therefore, refrain.

Each of these motivations not to partake in elective consumption is good in the sight of the Lord! Those who rightly practice this, along with those to whom properly consuming is acceptable to their conscience while using good judgment on circumstances to consume, are both expressions of the leading of the Spirit according to Scripture within a renewed heart and mind and should be embraced as such. People in these situations who wholeheartedly agree with Scripture in that, 1) God gave alcohol as a good gift, 2) Christ modeled proper use of alcohol for believers even in a society with alcohol abuse, and 3) drunkenness/abuse of alcohol is a serious sin that we all must avoid are all in the moderation position.

It is important, like with anything we engage in, that we are aware of the ways our flesh can cause us to abuse the good gifts of God. The Scriptures are clear that drunkenness is sinful, and a sinful consumption of alcohol can lead to more sin. Therefore, the one who drinks in moderation does so with the knowledge that he is responsible for his actions and accidental/unintentional overindulgence is no excuse for transgression.

Galatians 5:19-21 (NASB) Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

All Christians are subject to the laws of the land that do not contradict God's law. In America, these laws clearly indicate that underage recreational drinking or driving while intoxicated in particular are illegal. Given that we are to be submissive and obedient to such governmental laws where they do not contradict God's law, we can conclude that transgressions of governmental law are also transgressions of God's law (i.e. sin).

Romans 13:1-2 (NASB) Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.

In conclusion, all of us are accountable to God for our actions, and all of our actions must spring forth from faith.¹² For some, faith will lead to affirming alcohol as a good gift but choosing personal abstinence. For others, it will lead to moderation. The apostle Paul sums it up well in Philippians 4:5 when he says, "**Let your moderation be known unto all men...**" (KJV). In our personal participation or lack of participation, let us remember to do all things to the glory of God.¹³

For more thorough reading on this topic:

God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says About Alcohol by Kenneth Gentry is the most balanced and biblical treatment we've seen on what the Bible says about alcohol. Gentry's work is particularly helpful because while he argues for the biblical freedom to consume alcohol in moderation, he himself does not personally consume any alcohol; rather, he is concerned only with the truth of God's word.

Footnotes

1 Some people say that the Greek word translated wine (οἶνος) in John 2 actually means unfermented grape juice. However, the Bible speaks often of the dangers of drunkenness from excessive οἶνος. See especially the eldership requirements of 1 Timothy and Titus, as well as **Ephesians 5:18**. Regardless, the major Greek lexicons all indicate that οἶνος refers to a fermented drink of the vine.

2 Luke 7:33-34 (NASB) "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

3 This position is commonly an effort to distinguish between new wine and mixed wine. The problem is new wine can still intoxicate according to Scripture (Isaiah 24:7; Hosea 4:11; Joel 1:5), and mixed wine refers to special wines where various wines are mixed together and/or mixed with spices, and it does not refer to wine cut with water (Psalm 75:8, Song of Solomon 8:2). God refers to pouring out the wrath of His mixed wine on His enemies, which does not mean He will dilute justice (Psalm 75:8). The only time the practice of diluting wine is mentioned in the Bible is regarding merchants, who cut wine in order to rob customers (Isaiah 1:22). Another major problem with the argument that references to wine were really references to non-alcoholic juice is that not until the 19th century did man have a way (pasteurization) to keep the juice of grapes from immediately beginning to ferment once it was juiced.

4 Levites: Leviticus 10:9 (NASB) "Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations"; Nazirites: **Numbers 6:2-3** "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried."

5 Some might say these commands are carried forward in applying to elders or that the fact that we are all priests (**1 Peter 2:5-9**) is relevant. However, it is important to note that elder qualifications are specifically listed as prohibiting addiction to wine (**1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7**) and not moderate partaking.

6 Sins that are associated with drunkenness include the following: incest (Genesis 19:32-35), violence (Proverbs 4:17), adultery (Revelation 17:2), mockery and brawling (Proverbs 20:1), poverty (Proverbs 21:17), failed leadership (Proverbs 31:4-5), late night and early morning drinking (Isaiah 5:11-12), hallucinations (Isaiah 28:7), legendary antics (Isaiah 5:22), murder (2 Samuel 11:13), gluttony and poverty (Proverbs 23:20-21), vomiting (Jeremiah 25:27, 48:26; Isaiah 19:14), staggering (Jeremiah 25:27; Psalm 107:27; Job 12:25), madness (Jeremiah 51:7), nakedness (Habakkuk 2:15; Lam. 4:21), inattention (Joel 1:5), escapism (Hosea 4:11), depression (Luke 21:34), and staying up all night (1 Thessalonians 5:7).

7 Proverbs 23:20-21 (NASB) Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe one with rags.

8 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

9 1 Timothy 5:23 (NASB) No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

10 1 Corinthians 10:29 (NASB) why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? **Romans 14:22 (NASB)** The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

11 Galatians 5:1 (NASB) It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

12 Romans 14:23 (NASB) whatever is not from faith is sin.

13 1 Corinthians 10:31 (NASB) Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.