

# What does the Bible Teach about Alcohol?

**Summary:** 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 abstinence. For others, it will lead to moderation. Regardless of our convictions, let us remember to do all things to the glory of God.

*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.*

## 1 Corinthians 10:29-31

The topic of alcoholic consumption is one of considerable concern within the evangelical church, especially within the context of the past century. There are basically three positions on the issue: prohibition, abstention and moderation.

- **Prohibition:** alcohol is evil and all drinking is sin
- **Abstention:** alcohol is not evil and drinking is not sinful, but all Christians should nonetheless refrain out of love of brother
- **Moderation:** drinking is not sinful, but conscience and circumstances should dictate an individual's freedom to partake

From the pages of Scripture, we will find that the position of prohibition is untenable, not reflective of the text. In order to determine which of the other two perspectives is most representative of Biblical revelation, let's take a short journey through some relevant passages.

## Old Testament

Within the pages of the Old Testament, wine was considered to be a gift of God, indicative of His blessing.

*And wine which makes man's heart glad, So that he may make {his} face glisten with oil, And food which sustains man's heart.*

## Psalm 104:15

*You may spend the money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household.*

## Deuteronomy 14:26

*Honor the LORD from your wealth And from the first of all your produce; So your barns will be filled with plenty And your vats will overflow with new wine.*

## Proverbs 3:9-10

At the same time, the Bible also restricted drunkenness and prohibited those of certain religious/governmental offices from partaking of alcohol within certain contexts.

**Levites** - *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...*

## Leviticus 10:9

**Kings** – *It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, Or for rulers to desire strong drink, For they will drink and forget what is decreed, And pervert the rights of all the afflicted.*

## Proverbs 31:4-5

**Nazirites** - *Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the LORD, he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, nor shall he drink any grape juice nor eat fresh or dried grapes.*

## Numbers 6:2-3

## The New Testament

*This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.*

## John 2:11

What was this first sign? Did Christ raise the dead, give sight to the blind, cast out a demon, or heal the lame? No, He turned water into wine<sup>1</sup> for a large crowd gathered at a wedding.

<sup>1</sup> 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. It is also important to note that grape juice was ap- parently a product available and distinguished from wine as is indicated in Numbers 6:3. Although not appearing in the Biblical text, there was also another word in that time period for grape juice which would have been more appropriate had that been the intention (BDAG, 701).

In Luke 7:33-34, Jesus is accused of being a drunkard.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the accusation was incorrect in that Jesus, being without sin, would not have taken drink to excess, but the implication that He indeed drank is certainly present.<sup>3</sup>

In Paul's epistles, while continuing to condemn drunkenness, the author articulates a theology of freedom of conscience. This is especially seen in 1 Corinthians 10 and Romans 14. This theology will be the understanding which guides our interpretation of the issue.

## A Theology of Moderation

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

Overall, the Bible reveals a theology in which each individual is subject to a renewed spiritual conscience, responsible to God for his actions in light of such. We are not governed by the consciences of others,<sup>5</sup> but are bound instead by the will of our beloved Lord. To deny another believer's ability to respond to the leading of the Lord is the essence of legalism and a denial of the very freedom for which he was saved.<sup>6</sup>

Alcohol is not necessarily or inherently evil. Certainly we recognize that excess leads to regrettable, evil, and destructive consequences. However, the very real fact that some will abuse the freedom does not mean that we should therefore strip all of their liberty. Does the fact that some abuse the gift of sex lead us to a position of marital celibacy? Does the sin of gluttony<sup>7</sup> lead us to purposed starvation? Of course not, rather, we recognize the limits which God has placed upon His gifts and enjoy them within such boundaries.

Like food, alcohol was created by God to be enjoyed within limits by His creatures.<sup>8</sup> It can be used as an element in worship, celebration, thanksgiving, and partying, 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.<sup>9</sup>

Some people will find that they are too susceptible to excess in order to worshipfully partake in moderation and will therefore be led toward a position of absolute abstinence. This is good in the sight of the Lord! Some will find that any consumption, within the confines of their unique circumstances, would result in a compromised witness and will therefore sacrificially refrain. This is good in the sight of the Lord! Some will find moderation to be acceptable to their conscience and circumstances and will therefore joyfully drink in such a manner. This is good in the sight of the Lord! None of the above positions are more holy or sinful than the others. Rather, all are expressions of the leading of the Spirit within a renewed heart and mind and should be embraced as such.

Regardless of one's personal convictions on the issue, a few absolutes need to be stated:

- No one can impose more strict standards than Scripture commands upon another believer. If an individual is convicted by the act of drinking, he or she must not force such a conviction upon another. To do so is similar to the Pharisaical practice of legalism, to exalt tradition and interpretation over the actual Scriptural text.
- *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*

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:33-34 *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!'*

<sup>3</sup> Some would point to the last supper as support of this position, but the text says merely "fruit of the wine" which could be either grape juice or wine.

<sup>4</sup> Some might say that 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.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:29 ... why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? Romans 14:22 *The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.*

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 5:1 *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.*

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 23:20-21 *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.*

<sup>8</sup> 1 Timothy 4:3 *{men} who forbid marriage {and advocate} abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.*

<sup>9</sup> 1 Timothy 5:23 *No longer drink water {exclusively}, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.*

*another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.*

### **Romans 14:3-4, 10, 13**

- If a believer finds himself in a situation in which the exercise of his freedom would cause another brother to stumble, then he must restrict himself. For example, we would often be wise to refrain in the presence of a recovering alcoholic. We must be careful to not allow our freedom to lead others into sin. Recognizing our rights and yet denying them for the good of others is explicitly commended.
- *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.*

### **1 Corinthians 6:12**

- *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.*

### **Romans 14:15, 21**

- Drunkenness is sinful and alcohol is addictive; this much is clear. All understandings on alcohol must be filtered through this lens. The one who drinks in moderation does so with the knowledge that he is responsible for his actions in this area and accidental overindulgence is no excuse for transgression.
- *Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.*

### **Proverbs 20:1**

- *Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink, Who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them!*

### **Isaiah 5:11**

- *And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit...*

### **Ephesians 5:18**

- *Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.*

### **Romans 13:13**

- *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.*

### **Galatians 5:19-21**

- All Christians are subject to the laws of the land. In America, these laws clearly indicate that underage drinking or driving and driving 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).
- *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.*

### **Romans 13:1-2**

## **Conclusion**

All of us are accountable to God for our actions and all of our actions must spring forth from faith.<sup>10</sup> For some, faith will lead to abstinence. For others, it will lead to moderation. Regardless of our convictions, let us remember to do all things to the glory of God.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 14:23 ... whatever is not from faith is sin.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or what- ever you do, do all to the glory of God.