

The Illusion that Drinking Alcohol is Harmless

There is a strong illusion in our society that the common practice of drinking alcohol in social or recreational settings is harmless. The reality is that alcohol leads to many physical, social, family, and spiritual problems. Alcohol deceives its user into thinking his problems go away (Prov. 20:1), but it solves no problems and creates many. It is addictive and enslaving. Serious character flaws and spiritual shortcomings typically develop with the use of alcohol (Isa. 5:11-12, 21-23). While drinking is accepted in the world, it is one of the things that a Christian must leave behind (1 Peter 4:3-5). Being a drinker and being spiritual are polar opposites. Ephesians 5:18 says, “And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.”

A Needed Reality Check!

Acceptance of drinking alcohol is engrained in our culture at every turn. Drinking is made to look enjoyable in advertisements, TV, and movies. Over \$2 billion per year is spent by advertisers (That’s 2,000 million dollars!). We’re told it’s okay to drink if we drink responsibly, but how many people who drink always drink responsibly even by their own standards? Our society (and many Christians who live in it) desperately need a reality check and a wake-up call on the issue drinking alcohol. We are asleep and dreaming in a fantasy land if we go about day by day in denial of the serious spiritual and physical harm caused by alcohol!

Our culture focuses attention on making sure homosexuals are not mistreated but rather celebrated, and that children eat their vegetables, and that adults not be allowed to order a large size sugary soft drink! In the meantime, the real life consequences of drinking are virtually ignored. The only issue our culture has with drinking at all is the issue of drinking and driving.

Drinking and driving is a serious problem.

- Over 10,000 deaths per year in the U.S. are related to drinking and driving.
- On average, every 90 seconds someone is injured in a drunk-driving crash. [MADD]
- Many have lost loved ones and friends because of those who drink and drive.
- The NHTSA (1999) estimated that 4 million people are victimized each year by 2.6 million drunk driving crashes.

Alcohol causes or contributes to many other problems.

- *Connection to Crime.* 37% of state prisoners serving time for a violent offense in 2004 said they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offense [Bureau of Justice statistics]
- *Effects on home and personal life*
 - Correlation to domestic violence
 - Correlation to the break-up of families. Studies have shown that the more you drink, the more likely you are to get divorced.
 - Addiction to alcohol may result in a lack of money for food and other essentials.
 - Correlation to risky sexual behavior and unintended pregnancies.
 - Lack of productivity or loss of job. It is estimated that well over 100 billion dollars of productivity is lost each year due to on the job drinking.
- *A factor in many diseases and deaths* (Facts from the *National Institutes of Health*). Drinking too much – on a single occasion or over time – can take a serious toll on your health.

- **Brain:** Alcohol interferes with the brain’s communication pathways, and can affect the way the brain looks and works. These disruptions can change mood and behavior, and make it harder to think clearly and move with coordination.
- **Liver:** Heavy drinking takes a toll on the liver, and can lead to a variety of problems and liver inflammations including: Steatosis, or fatty liver, Alcoholic Hepatitis, Fibrosis, and Cirrhosis.
- **Pancreas:** Alcohol causes the pancreas to produce toxic substances that can eventually lead to pancreatitis, a dangerous inflammation and swelling of the blood vessels in the pancreas that prevents proper digestion.
- **Cancer:** Drinking too much alcohol can increase your risk of developing certain cancers, including cancers of the mouth, esophagus, throat, liver, and breast.
- **Immune System:** Drinking too much can weaken your immune system, making your body a much easier target for disease. Drinking a lot on a single occasion slows your body’s ability to ward off infections – even up to 24 hours after getting drunk.

Some studies have suggested health *benefits* associated with drinking certain kinds of alcoholic beverages, particularly red wine, and there does seem to be some merit to these studies. But for the most part, the same benefits can be found in grape juice. Even abusing alcohol may have certain health benefits, but they are far outweighed by the damage done to one’s overall health. For instance, doctors admit that the cadavers of drunks have clean arteries, but they have diseased livers! Drinking is like shooting yourself in the foot to stop feeling the pain of a headache; it works, but it does more harm than good!!

These are real life true consequences of drinking. Many of them have spiritual implications, and that is our concern. What does God say about drinking alcohol?

Wine and Strong Drink in the Bible

This lesson will not go extensively into looking at all the words for “wine” and “strong drink” in the Bible. Suffice it to say that “wine” in the Bible does not always refer to fermented drink (Isa. 16:10; 65:8; Mark 2:22). “Wine” is used of both fermented and unfermented drink. The context helps us decide its meaning in a given passage.

The Old Testament sometimes uses the phrase “strong drink” (Hebrew *shekar*) to clearly indicate that a drink is alcoholic. When ancient people fermented wine, it was not possible for the wine to have more than about 9 or 10% alcohol by volume, since this is the maximum that can be attained in natural fermentation. Most of the time ancient wine had considerably less alcohol in it. “Strong drink” therefore would be wine with alcohol content in the upper range of what was naturally possible – approximately 7 to 9 percent.

Most of our modern alcoholic beverages would have more than qualified as “strong drink” in Bible times. Modern wines, for instance, undergo processes to increase alcohol content. *Chaptalization* is a process perfected by a French chemist named Jean Antoine Chaptal around the year 1800 A.D. in which sugar is added during the fermenting process to increase the production of alcohol. *Fortification* is another process in which alcohol is added after the fermentation process. So, most wine nowadays has an alcohol content of 8% to 15%, with some wines having as high as 22% (e.g., Zinfandels). Popular beers are usually in the 4% to 6% range, although a few are considerably higher. Hard liquors (whiskey, tequila, vodka, rum) have 40 to 50% alcohol, and bourbon can have nearly 80% alcohol! So, virtually every sort of alcoholic beverage sold on the market today would qualify as “strong drink” in Bible times.

The Bible does not give us the freedom to casually consume something which God says is a mocker, a brawler, will lead us astray, and is unwise (Proverbs 20:1)

Drinking alcohol in all of its stages is prohibited for Christians

In 1 Peter 4:3, there are three alcohol-related sins which Christians are to avoid:

- **Drunkenness** is translated “excess of wine” in the KJV. From the Greek word *oinophlugia*.
- **Revelries** is translated “revellings” in the KJV. From the Greek word *komos*, it refers to wild conduct associated with drinking or to drunken parties in which the participants forsake social decency (cf. Rom. 13:13).
- **Drinking parties** is translated “banquetings” in the KJV and “carousing” in other translations. From the Greek word *potos*, it literally means “a drinking” without reference to amount. Greek scholar R. C. Trench says concerning *potos*: It is “not necessarily excessive” but that it gives “opportunity for excess.” (*Synonyms of the New Testament*, p. 211). The verb form of this Greek noun is *potizo*, and it means “to give to drink” without regard to the amount (as in Matthew 10:42 “*give to drink...a cup of cold water*”). This prohibits Christians from drinking alcohol on social or recreational occasions, even if they don’t drink “too much.”

Drinking Alcohol leads to other sins

- **Drunkenness or intoxication is a sin** (Eph. 5:15-18. Gal. 5:21). It’s important to realize that becoming drunk is a process. Obviously, a person is not drunk when he takes his first sip of alcohol. But at what point in the process of drinking does he commit the sin of drunkenness? Most drinkers will say that they can stop before they become drunk, but they will nearly all admit to “having a little too much” at times. Even righteous people can be ensnared! Consider Lot (2 Peter 2:8; Gen. 19:30-36) and Noah (Gen. 9:21). Millions of people have damaged or destroyed their lives by poor choices they made after having drunk a little more than they intended! The only sure way to avoid drunkenness is to avoid drinking to begin with! How can a person sincerely pray, “Lead me not into temptation,” and then drink on social occasions where there is ample opportunity to become drunk?
- **Lack of self-control** is sinful. Christians are to have “self-control” or temperance. (2 Peter 1:6). Self-control is “the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, especially his sensual appetites” (Thayer, 167). Alcohol takes away self-control! Good judgment and the ability to control words and actions can be hampered by drinking just a little alcohol.

To illustrate, consider the effect that just a little drink can have on your driving. Studies have shown that you don't need to drink much alcohol before your ability to drive becomes impaired. Certain driving skills--such as steering a car while at the same time responding to changes in traffic--can be impaired by blood alcohol concentrations as low as 0.02 percent. A 160-pound man will have a BAC of about 0.04 percent 1 hour after consuming two 12-ounce beers or two other standard drinks on an empty stomach. Although most States set the BAC limit for adults who drive after drinking at 0.08 to 0.10 percent, it is a known fact that impairment of driving skills begins at much lower levels.

If alcohol in relatively small amounts can impair driving skills in this way, we must ask, “When does impairment in praying skills or parenting skills occur?” At what point are

your inhibitions weakened enough that you begin to lose self-control and make unrighteous choices?

Answering Arguments in Defense of Drinking

Some Christians try to justify social drinking with the following arguments:

- **Justification:** “Christ made wine at the wedding at Cana” (John 2:1-11).
Answer: Was the wine fermented? According to the text, Jesus made 120-180 gallons and approved of its consumption after guests had already drunk a large amount. Notice that the master of the feast indicated that the guests had “well drunk.” If the wine Jesus made was fermented, then Jesus approved the consumption of large quantities of alcohol, and He would be guilty of encouraging people to violate both Old and New Testament laws regarding drunkenness. Is it not fairer to Christ and more in harmony with His character and with Scriptures to say that He made unfermented wine?!
- **Justification:** “Timothy was told to take wine” (1 Timothy 5:23).
Answer: Paul told Timothy to “use a little wine for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities.” Timothy was a teetotaler, not a social drinker! Until this point he only drank water. Now Paul tells him, “no longer drink only water” but “use a little wine.” Is this fermented or unfermented wine? Which is better for stomach problems and frequent illness? And how much was Timothy to drink? He is told to “use a little!” And what was the purpose of drinking “a little wine”? It was for his health! This is not an allowance to consume alcohol in social settings day after day!
- **Justification:** “It’s drinking to excess that is prohibited.” “It’s OK as long as you don’t drink too much” (Titus 2:3; 1:7).
Answer: Prohibiting a lot doesn’t permit a little! Condemning an “overflow of wickedness” does not permit a little bit of wickedness, does it? (James 1:21). More to the point, 1 Peter 4:4 says, “In regard to these (sins related to drinking) they think it strange that you do not run with *them* in the same flood (excess) of dissipation.” The Gentiles committed these sins in excess. They thought it was strange that Christians wouldn’t do what they did. Does it sound like Peter is telling Christians that it would be OK to engage in a little bit of these things as long as they didn’t go to excess??? Certainly not!
- **Justification:** “Romans 14:21 allows the use of wine as long as it does not cause others to stumble.”
Answer: This assumes that “wine” in Romans 14:21 is fermented. Is it? This chapter in Romans deals with liberties – things Christians are free to do or not do, including eating certain foods. “Wine” here best fits with the context of “meats” which God accepts when taken with a clear conscience (14:3). But why would unfermented wine cause others to stumble? Because, just like meats offered to idols, unfermented wine was used in gluttony in pagan Roman and Greek cults! (Matthew Miller, “Alcohol and the Christian,” *Watchman Magazine*, Feb. 2002).
But even if it is granted that “wine” in this context is indeed fermented wine, still the verse plainly says that it is good not to “drink wine”!
- **Justification:** “Wine is a natural creation of God, so He allows us to enjoy it” (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Wine is a food that God has created to be received with thanksgiving.

- **Answer:** Is wine a food created by God? Actually, grapes are God's natural creation, as are yeast and the process of fermentation. But it takes man's deliberate effort and skill to produce drinkable alcoholic wine. God made all sorts of things that can be consumed by man for special purposes and in limited quantities. All agree that God Himself limits wine consumption: the question is how much? Complying with God's restrictions on wine is hardly "commanding to abstain from foods." Is it OK to take opium in unlimited amounts, without restrictions, because God made poppies from which opium comes? Similarly, in Colossians 2:16, 20-23, "Judge not in food or drink" refers to regulations that are "according to the commandments and doctrines of men." What about the commandments and doctrines of God that we've clearly laid out in this lesson?

Conclusion: It is wrong to bind where the Lord has not bound. It is also wrong to put an occasion of stumbling or temptation in the way of another (Luke 17:1-2).

Let me tell you a story about a young man's spiritual decline and the part that alcohol played in it. This young man was raised by Christians and taught from an early age that drinking was wrong. Not long after leaving home as a young adult, he was told by a preacher it was ok to drink. Around that time, he began buying beer and drinking at home. Occasionally he'd have a drink with buddies socially after work. Eventually he would say that he would get buzzed but not drunk (although the two are legally the same). As his life spiraled down, he would become involved in sexual immorality; engaging in the worst kinds of marital unfaithfulness, ultimately losing his faith in the reliability of the Bible as God's word. On March 8, 2015, he and his girlfriend had been drinking and got into a domestic altercation. He was shot, treated at the hospital, and then sent to jail. A few days later, he promised to stop drinking because he said he realized that it kills your inhibitions and causes you to make bad choices.

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