

What the Bible Says about Wine and Strong Drink

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention publishes Fact Sheets on alcohol use.

They state that excessive alcohol use is the 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death in the United States. That's about 80,000 deaths a year. In 2006 there were more than 1.2 million emergency room visits and 2.7 million doctor office visits due to excessive drinking.

The use of alcoholic beverages is a lifestyle, cultural, and Biblical issue. We are concerned about its effect on our society today such as drunk driving, murders, family abuse, and sexual assaults. Many news stories of these and other crimes report that they were related to drinking, being in a bar, or at a party flowing with alcohol. Social drinking often results in anti-social behavior. The devil has deceived people by giving alcohol a personality. Think of drinking a beer and you picture a regular guy. Think of a martini and you picture sophistication and prosperity. Think of brandy and sherry and you see older people sipping these. And we connect wine with romance and even religion. The devil has been highly successful in creating a mental picture even among religious people that social drinking or drinking in moderation is approved of God. But you cannot find approval for it in the Scriptures. **Let's see what the Bible says about wine and strong drink.**

Most people agree that God condemns drunkenness.

Galatians 5:19-21 names it as a work of the flesh along with sins like adultery, fornication, and murder and says that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Isaiah 5:11 pronounces woe on those who pursue intoxicating drink.

Proverbs 20:1 says "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise." Yes, alcoholic beverages make a fool of a person.

Proverbs 23:29-35 also describes the effects of drinking and makes it clear that God's people are not to indulge in strong drink.

Proverbs 31:4-5 says that national leaders should not drink wine or intoxicating drink because it affects their judgment. What makes us think that God would want His church leaders and other Christians to drink alcoholic beverages? Modern studies show that the effects of alcohol on the brain regulate judgment even before it affects perception and motor functions. We should be aware that even minimal use has an influence upon our thinking and reasoning ability. So called moderate drinking really means moderate intoxication!

In Leviticus 10:8-11 we read "Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them by the hand of Moses." We see here that the priests were forbidden the use of any fermented beverages as they ministered in their priestly functions.

Today all Christians are priests according to 1 Peter 2:9. We are to continually function in the capacity of offering spiritual sacrifices to God. Therefore, how can any Christian justify drinking an alcoholic beverage for social or pleasurable purposes?

This lesson will examine why some believe that so called social or moderate drinking of alcoholic beverages is permissible. God's Word is clear. **The confusion has been caused by words of man.**

The confusion results because the English word *wine* today refers to a fermented beverage that contains alcohol. But in Bible times people did not drink *wine*. They drank *oinos* and *yayin*. These were the most commonly used Greek and Hebrew words which have been translated wine. Those words referred to the fruit produced by the vine. It could refer to the grape or it could refer to the juice of the grape. It could mean fermented or unfermented.

Many people today because of our modern culture automatically assume that when wine is mentioned in Scripture that it was always an intoxicating beverage. However, the Bible words for *wine* were generic terms that could refer to either fresh grape juice or an intoxicating beverage. Many modern translators and commentators have allowed their own bias to confuse the interpretation of these passages. Therefore, we must use the Bible to interpret the Bible.

In the Old Testament there are 3 commonly used Hebrew words used for wine and strong drink.

The context can and often must be used to determine the meaning and use of the word.

For example, Joel 1:10 uses the word wine to refer to grapes dried up in the fields.

Isaiah 65:8 refers to new wine in the cluster. Obviously, the juice of the grape while in the cluster could not be intoxicating. Jeremiah 48:33 refers to wine in the wine presses which is the juice of freshly squeezed grapes and was not yet fermented. Notice that Isaiah 16:10 describes wine in the presses and Joel 2:24 describes the vats overflowing with new wine. They are referring to fresh grape juice, not an intoxicating beverage.

But in Isaiah 28:7 we see a different use of the word wine. The prophet strongly denounces those who use the intoxicating drink of alcoholic wine when he says, "But they also have erred through wine, and through intoxicating drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink, they are swallowed up by wine, they are out of the way through intoxicating drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment."

Now let's consider their process of preserving fresh grape juice. Some argue that in Bible times new wine or fresh grape juice could not be preserved. But that is not true.

Bible dictionaries, archeological evidence, and other historical sources cite ancient skills and techniques for the preservation of fresh grape juice for a year or longer.

In fact, the environmental conditions in terms of temperature, sugar, and yeast have to be just right for fermentation to occur and produce alcoholic wine.

If those conditions are not right, the juice can simply sour, become vinegar, or spoil.

In Bible times it was much easier to preserve grape juice than it was to turn it into alcoholic wine.

They could raise the temperature to kill the yeast. They could change the sugar content. Other simple methods they used were cooling and filtration. They used special containers especially for preserving the juice and placed them underground or in cool water.

And when necessary they heated and boiled off any alcohol that formed in fermented juice.

People in Jesus' day did not have to drink alcoholic wine. Many people who try to justify drinking alcoholic beverages ignore the facts of the past and the process of fermentation and distillation.

Also, there is a great difference between the distilled fortified alcoholic beverages of today and the naturally fermented alcoholic wines of the first century. Modern alcoholic beverages are far more potent with higher alcoholic content than were the ancient wines. Even if the Bible permitted the use of the alcoholic wines of their day, it in no way justifies the use of the more potent higher alcoholic beverages used today.

However, some people try to justify drinking alcoholic beverages based on Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee in John 2:1-10.

The way to interpret whether it is alcoholic or not is to let the Bible interpret the Bible.

We know that it was not alcoholic wine that would make men drunk. Jesus would have been in violation of Habakkuk 2:15 which says "Woe to him who gives drink to the neighbor, pressing him to your bottle, even to make him drunk, that you may look on his nakedness." We know that Jesus would not have enabled people to become drunk.

1 Corinthians 5:11 tells us "not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner - not even to eat with such a person." 1 Corinthians 6:10 says that drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Ephesians 5:18 commands us "do not be drunk with wine."

In addition, most Bible scholars agree that the master of the wedding feast calling it good wine meant that it was fresh and sweet fruit of the vine - not alcoholic. A few modern day translators in verse 10 insert their personal opinion when they suggest that the people were drunk or had too much to drink. They have mistranslated the Greek word *methuo* which means filled, saturated, or satisfied.

That word does not necessarily infer drunkenness. The false view that Jesus provided an alcoholic drink for already intoxicated people turns our Savior into a common bartender.

Jesus produced a very good quality, non-fermented wine. He did not and would not produce an alcoholic beverage that would cause the wedding guests to sin.

Others try to justify drinking by using Timothy as an example. Yes, Paul told Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach and infirmities in 1 Timothy 5:23. That is not justification for moderate social drinking. Paul is prescribing medicine to Timothy. He is not granting permission to drink socially. The fact that Paul even had to tell Timothy to do it infers that this is something Timothy normally stayed away from.

Another area of discussion has been whether church elders can drink alcoholic beverages.

1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7 list some of the **qualifications** of church elders or overseers.

The Bible says they must be "not given to wine." The original meaning of the Greek words translated "not given to" literally means "not near", "not in the vicinity of", or "not near to the proximity of."

The Bible is clear. An elder is to stay away from alcoholic beverages. Again, some modern translators have left the wrong impression to allow people to justify their use of alcoholic beverages.

What about deacons? 1 Timothy 3:8 says they are "not given to **much** wine."

Does that give them permission for moderate drinking? Are they not leaders? Most deacons I know want to be thought of as a church leader of their assigned area of work. And they were recognized as leaders in Philippians 1:1. We already have seen what the Bible teaches about leaders use of intoxicating drink in Proverbs 31:4-5.

What about the word "much"? Ecclesiastes 7:17 says "Be not over **much** wicked." Does that mean that you can be a little bit or moderately wicked?

1 Peter 4:4 speaks against "**excess** of riot." Does that approve some riotous living?

Using common sense and letting the Bible interpret the Bible should lead one to the conclusion that deacons or any other child of God should not use intoxicating beverages.

Also consider Titus 2:2-3. It says that older men must be sober. That word comes from the Greek word that literally means "to abstain from wine." The older women **likewise** are admonished "not given to much wine." Is it reasonable to think the older men must totally abstain and the older women could drink a little?

Even if a person disagrees with the above Scriptures, **how can one justify drinking when they care about their example and influence on others?**

1 Timothy 4:12 says to set the example in conduct and purity. Also, a Christian could become a stumbling block to those who might not stop with an occasional drink or so called moderate drinking. Romans 14:13 commands us "not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way." If we even remotely care about the example we set and our influence upon our children or anyone who might be tempted to drink alcoholic beverages, we will never buy or consume it or imply that it is permissible to do so. In fact, we must clearly teach that the Bible forbids its use. God will hold us accountable for anyone we lead to hurt themselves or others.

Jesus said in Mark 9:42 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea."

Why should a Christian want to avoid alcoholic beverages?

There is a lot of evidence of the dangers of alcoholic beverages in our society today. That should be enough to make a person totally abstain. However, for the Christian, what the Bible says should be all that we need to totally abstain and take a strong stand against the use of alcoholic drinking. This study has shown from the Bible that intoxicating drink is condemned and prohibited for use by God's people. On the other hand, no one has ever produced a Scripture authorizing the use of alcoholic beverages by a Christian for pleasure.

Calling people to follow Jesus.

Jesus wants us to turn from the world and turn to Him.
He wants us to deny ourselves and follow Him.

Listen to what He said in Mark 8:33-38.

He also wants us to be baptized and learn to do all that He taught.
Here is what He said in Matthew 28:18-20.