



## On Alcohol & Drug Use: A Biblical Perspective

Alcoholic beverages and certain drugs get attention today because they are abused, causing harm to both the user and to others. As a result, alcohol consumption is controlled, and the production, transportation, sell, and use of certain drugs is banned. Both alcohol and restricted drugs have the potential to negatively affect the mental and emotional state of the user and those with whom he or she comes into contact.

Wine and beer are referenced in the Bible, but other drugs banned in the United States today are not. Still, the Bible has something to say about the use of dangerous drugs today.

Scripture portrays wine as a gift from God for joyous living and good health. It also marks drunkenness as sin. The first refers to the use of wine; it's OK. The second refers to a behavior that comes from the misuse of wine; it's not OK.

We CANNOT, however, accurately apply the first truth (it's OK) about wine to all alcohol and drugs. The Bible says wine in moderation is OK, not that cocaine in moderation is OK. But we CAN accurately apply the second truth (misuse) about wine to all alcohol and drugs because it is referring to behavior -- drunkenness.

In short, while the Bible says wine is a good gift from God, Scripture equally says that partaking of a substance to the point of losing control of one's mental and physical capabilities violates God's good gift.

Let's follow a simple definition trail. Drunkenness is generally defined as intoxication, which Merriam-Webster's online dictionary says is "an abnormal state that is essentially a poisoning." M-W's second definition: "the condition of having physical or mental control markedly diminished by the effects of alcohol or drugs." And, finally, "a strong excitement or elation."

The second definition links alcohol and drugs, and we can clearly see in the others a linkage. Alcohol and drugs can both lead to "an abnormal state." Both can result in a loss of "physical or mental control." And both can lead to "strong excitement or elation."

This is stated up front so we will understand that while Scripture affirms wine, and only wine, as a good gift from God, it condemns the type of behavior that comes from the abuse of alcohol and the use of other substances that cause intoxication. Wine is OK; intoxication of any kind is not.

### Intoxication

Let's look at a few of the Bible passages about intoxication.

*For there has already been enough time spent in doing the will of the pagans: carrying on in unrestrained behavior, evil desires, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and lawless idolatry (1 Peter 4:3, CSB).*

The writer is contrasting the lives of pagans and Christ followers. He is connecting the behaviors listed with the ways of pagans, not of Christians. Here's an interesting thing: All of these are bad in their own right, but drunkenness often leads to the others -- unrestrained behavior, evil desires, orgies, and carousing -- except possibly the last one, lawless idolatry.



*And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless living, but be filled by the Spirit . . .*  
(Ephesians 5:18, CSB).

It's a declarative statement from the Apostle Paul: "don't get drunk." And he says why, because it leads to reckless living. Two thousand years later, our experience affirms this truth that alcohol abuse and drug use do indeed lead to reckless living. Paul does add the note about being filled with God's Spirit. Paul knows life can get tough, very tough, and that we need help coping. He is saying, fill your spirit with the Holy Spirit rather than filling your body with wine in order to cope with life.

*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21, CSB).*

Drunkenness is grouped with other "works of the flesh" -- things that may satisfy some of our natural, animalistic longings but which are not compatible with life in God's kingdom. We have been warned. This is actually Paul's second warning to the Galatians. It is not easy to combat these selfish behaviors. As stated in the Ephesians passage, we need the filling of God's Spirit to wage this personal war for the things of God as opposed to the things of the flesh. There is a Proverbs passage that brings beer into the mix and connects intoxication with a lack of wisdom.

*Wine is a mocker, beer is a brawler;  
whoever goes astray because of them is not wise (Proverbs 20:1, CSB).*

A difference in the results of drinking these two types of alcoholic beverages is noted. Too much wine will lead to loose lips -- saying things the sober you would not say -- and too much beer leads to combativeness and fighting. In our day, the English phrase "drunken brawl" reflects this same truth.

There are many biblical warnings about the problems associated with wine and intoxicated behavior, but let's conclude this section with Jesus' own words about a coming time when "Heaven and earth will pass away."

*"Be on your guard, so that your minds are not dulled from carousing, drunkenness, and worries of life, or that day will come on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come on all who live on the face of the whole earth. But be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place and to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36, CSB).*



## Wine -- A Gift from God for Joy and Health

The biblical verses about drunkenness can be applied to all substances that cause intoxication, whether alcoholic or dangerous drugs. The Bible does, however, single out wine for praise.

*He [God] causes grass to grow for the livestock  
and provides crops for man to cultivate,  
producing food from the earth,  
wine that makes human hearts glad—  
making his face shine with oil—  
and bread that sustains human hearts (Psalm 104:14-15, CSB).*

God gives humankind wine in the same manner that God causes the grass to grow and provides crops for food. God gives this wine to make human hearts glad. God is well aware of the suffering that life entails on earth since the fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden. We need gladdened hearts. We also need good health.

*Don't continue drinking only water, but use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses (1 Timothy 5:23, CSB).*

Even in pre-science times, people had come to realize that wine provided health benefits for one's digestive system. One could say that wine was good then because the water was often contaminated, but the verse does not say, "don't drink the water;" it says, "don't continue drinking only water."

There is no more famous wine story in the Bible than the one involving Jesus actually making wine from water.

*When the wine ran out, Jesus's mother told him, "They don't have any wine."  
"What does that have to do with you and me, woman?" Jesus asked. "My hour has not yet come." . . .  
"Fill the jars with water," Jesus told them. So they filled them to the brim. Then he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the headwaiter." And they did.  
When the headwaiter tasted the water (after it had become wine), he did not know where it came from—though the servants who had drawn the water knew. He called the groom and told him, "Everyone sets out the fine wine first, then, after people are drunk, the inferior. But you have kept the fine wine until now."*

*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee. He revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him (John 2:3-4, 7-11, CSB).*



Jesus was hesitant about performing this miracle, but he didn't say, "Wine is bad, so I shouldn't make any." Jesus said the time was not right for him to perform a miracle. If wine were bad, then the Bible has recorded Jesus doing something bad. That is not what it says.

Scripture quotes Jesus as saying that his critics actually accused him of being a "drunkard."

*"For John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Son of Man [Jesus] came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds"* (Matthew 11:18-19, CSB)

Jesus was not a glutton and a drunkard, and he says the wisdom of the way he lived revealed this. But his critics did not like that Jesus ate and drank with people they considered unclean and at times when they did not think it appropriate.

There are many other verses in the Bible about wine being a regular part of life in the Jewish community through the centuries. Wine is not condemned; the intoxication that comes from consumption of too much wine is consistently condemned.

## People Who Serve Christ

Accepting that the Bible says wine is a good gift from God and that intoxication is bad, Christ followers have freedom to partake of wine in an appropriate manner. And that freedom may apply to other alcohol if intoxication is not involved. Still there is more for the Christian to consider; it has to do with the impact of our behaviors on those around us.

There is no better place to start than with Romans 14.

*... if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval* (Romans 14:15-18, CSB).

Go backwards through the passage. Paul is talking about someone who is acceptable to God and receives human approval. Such a person serves Christ in righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Christian serves Christ and this shows up in right living, peaceable relationships, and a joyous spirit because of the work of the Holy Spirit in that believer. This is the goal.

Paul then brings up "the kingdom of God," which is important in the New Testament. Jesus said he brought about this new reign. It is not an earthly rule; it is "not of this world," as are governments (John 18:36). It is an eternal kingdom that we become a part of when we follow Christ with our lives.

As Paul says, the kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking. Food and drink had been important in religion before this, including in Judaism, with its series of sacrifices and feasts. The Christ Way is different. The sacrifice has been made once and for all in Jesus' death on the cross (Hebrews 10:1-18).



So, for Christ followers, food and drink are different. They sustain us and are to be enjoyed. They are good, but with a caveat, as long as our consumption of them does not harm others, especially a fellow believer. To paraphrase Paul, “Do not destroy someone by what you eat and drink.”

How could what I eat or drink destroy someone else? There are a number of ways. If what I eat or drink makes me dangerous or difficult, I could destroy someone physically or mentally. If they make me unable to fulfill my responsibilities, I could destroy my family’s well being or someone’s trust in me.

### Getting Past Our Cultural Baggage

Every person who follows the Jesus Way has come from a cultural context. Before coming to Christ, each person has multiple ways of making sense of the world, of separating “good” from “bad,” of communicating with others. Following Christ disrupts a person’s original cultural settings because all societies reflect things that are both consistent and inconsistent with what God has revealed as good and right.

Paul understood this. He knew that a person who came to Christ did not suddenly have everything figured out about this new life. Conversion may happen quickly, but it also is a continuing process (called sanctification). Paul knew God’s kingdom was not about food and drink, but he also knew it takes time to shed one’s cultural baggage.

If a new believer in Paul’s day associated worship of Roman gods with the eating of food offered to those idols, chances are it would take him or her a while to grasp that such food was still just food. There are no other gods, so food offered to these phantoms was nothing more than simply food. But it takes a while to understand new ideas that are different from everything you have always thought.

Paul knew there was nothing “wrong” with food offered to idols, but he also knew that others were new in the church and did not realize that truth. He would rather forego eating something than to eat it and “destroy” a new believer’s faith. *“Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won’t cause my brother or sister to fall”* (1 Corinthians 8:13, CSB).

### Love Others as Much as Self

Not doing something because it might cause a problem for someone else is a high standard to set in determining what is right and wrong in our behavior. As Paul said.

*“Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible, but not everything builds up”* (1 Corinthians 10:23, CSB).

It also goes against the grain of our own culture. We live in a time and place that stresses self-esteem, self-fulfillment, self-motivation, self-actualization, self-acceptance, and on and on. Are any of those things bad? No. The opposite. All of them are good. What is bad is when self is all we think of; it is the distortion of the biblical command to love others as we love ourselves. I should not think of my self esteem unless I am going to care equally for another person’s self-esteem. And so on down the list.



It is important that we know and remember the Great Commandment as stated by Jesus. It helps make sense of Paul's concern for how his actions impact others.

*And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him [Jesus]: "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?"*

*He [Jesus] said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matt. 22:35-39, CSB).*

This conversation is about summarizing Old Testament law; it is about what God's people should do or how they should live. American readers today can easily miss the point here because we typically associate love with emotion. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes it clear that he is referring to what his followers must do. Jesus said, "Do this and you will live" (Luke 10: 28, CSB). Love is self-sacrificing living for the good of others. The great American preacher, Gardner C. Taylor, said of the Great Commandment:

"Love of the Eternal is no dead-end street. Love leads us out into the workaday world. It is not cloistered or quarantined. We love the Eternal first with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. Love takes an interest in those around us. Every person becomes the focus of our love" (Taylor, 36).

Our behaviors and decisions are not just about self; they are about self in relationship with God and others. We keep this in mind as we study what the Bible says about alcohol and substance abuse.

## Conclusion

Wine is a good gift from God, but it can be misused. If a person consumes it or any substance to the point of intoxication, then a person has moved into sinful behavior -- actions that miss the mark of God's good intentions for humankind. One mark of a Jesus disciple is a desire to not become intoxicated because of the damage it can do to one's self and to others.

But there is more to alcohol and drug use. If a behavior is seen by those around us as evil, it is best to avoid it. Because we love others as much as ourselves, we care about how our behaviors will impact them. It's a high standard but one we are called to pursue.