

# Questions About Drinking

**Introduction.** Every preacher gets asked about social drinking. It has been a while since we studied this issue, so we need to discuss it. The necessity of it is proven by the fact that I saw on Facebook recently where a Christian posted that they were going to celebrate their birthday with Jack Daniels whiskey. They claimed they only did this once a year, but is this right?

Teenagers show that social acceptance is a top motivation for underage drinkers. On MADD's website, several teenagers talked about their drinking. Justin proclaimed, "I'm more open to drinking now than smoking because I'm less likely to get caught drinking." Debbie stated, "It's not like I was pressured into drinking, but that's kind of what you do when you hang out with your friends. It's just the social norm." Mark said, "I drink to be more social. It makes me more outgoing. Alcohol basically enhances anything you do."

The spirit of the upcoming seasons often tempts people to drink socially in a way that they would not have been tempted at other times. Many of our young people regularly hear their peers discuss the "good times" they have under the influence of alcohol. We have to constantly remind them that this is Satan's lie to destroy their souls (Hebrews 3:13).

## I. ***The Importance Of Context***

- A. The basic principle to remember before exploring the biblical principles is that "wine" depends on context for its meaning.
  1. Many people see the word "wine" and automatically assume that it refers to alcohol. This false assumption has led to many wrong practices.
  2. The common New Testament word for wine, *oinos*, is a generic term used of the juice of the grape from the time when it is still in the grape on the vine, through its extraction in a winepress (not a grape juice press), to a beverage as non-alcoholic grape juice, and finally to alcoholic wine.
- B. Grape juice was a common drink of the time. When available, it was drunk fresh, and it was also evaporated of water into "must," a thick paste the consistency of toothpaste, which was kept in wineskins and reconstituted by adding water. This did not ferment during the time it was stored, and when reconstituted was, in fact, more resistant to fermentation than if it had not undergone this process. If produced with cold water from a spring or well it made a very refreshing drink. Of course, alcoholic wine was also produced from grapes, but one did not always and exclusively want to drink wine when one was thirsty and desired a cool drink, and this reconstituted grape juice was one

option available in the Middle East in biblical times. There are still places in the Middle East where this practice of making "must" and reconstituting it into grape juice has continued.

1. In Genesis 40:11, freshly-squeezed grape juice was a refreshing beverage.
  2. In Job 24:11, "tread their winepresses, and suffer thirst," indicates that the normal expectation was that they would derive a satisfying drink from what emerged out of the winepresses.
  3. In Micah 6:15, the Septuagint reads, "... and shalt make wine, but ye shall drink no wine" (cf. NIV: "you will crush grapes but not drink the wine;" NRSV: "you will tread grapes but not drink wine").
    - a) They trod out *oinos*, but they will not drink this *oinos*. This indicates that the normal expectation (apart from this promise of judgment) was that they would drink the juice that was pressed out.
    - b) Remembering the nature of Hebrew parallelism, Genesis 49:11 says, "... he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes."
- C. Other passages obviously use wine in another way (cf. Genesis 9:20-21). This suggests four categories in which *oinos* can fall.
1. Clear reference to non-alcoholic grape juice (Isaiah 65:8).
  2. Clear reference to alcoholic wine, but not the fortified wines of today, a development of more recent centuries (Proverbs 23:30).
  3. Clear reference to both of these categories together (Numbers 6:3).
  4. Ambiguous references that could fall into any one of the three preceding categories (Genesis 14:18; 1 Timothy 5:23).
- D. Joachim Jeremias, in *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (pp. 50-52), said, "Wine was drunk only on festive occasions ... Otherwise wine was generally used in everyday life only for medicinal purposes; it was regarded as an excellent medicine. In everyday life, water was drunk. The daily breakfast consisted of 'bread with salt and a tankard of water', and even at the main meal bread and water were the chief ingredients. It is ... quite out of the question that Jesus and his disciples should have drunk wine with their daily meals."

## II. **The Questions**

- A. Why do we say that it is wrong to drink when we cannot find any passage that directly commands a Christian to not drink?
1. Peter discusses alcohol in three stages in 1 Peter 4:3: *oinophlygiais* (drunkenness), *komois* (orgy, revelry), and *potois*, (drinking bout, drinking [without reference to the amount consumed] -- "... a drinking party, 'not of necessity excessive, but giving opportunity to

- excess” [Trench]). Also, Kubo, in vs. 7, translates *sophronesate* as “be sober, abstain from wine.”
2. R. K. Harrison comments on Proverbs 20:1, saying, “It should not be limited to getting drunk, as Berkeley implies. The passage concerns any use of wine, because of its final effects” (Wycliffe, p. 573).
  3. If we are warned, “Look not thou upon the wine” in Proverbs 23:29-35, should we be drinking it socially?
  4. This agrees with principles taught in Bible. For example, in Leviticus 10:8-9, priests could not drink when serving as priests. But we now serve as God’s priests (Hebrews 13:15-16; 1 Peter 2:5, 9). If they needed sober minds, we do even more so.
- B. Other than medicinal uses of alcohol, I cannot find a passage that says it is a sin to take a drink. Is it God’s preference that we not do so?
1. Yes. The medicinal use of alcohol is the only exception to the rule against drinking stated in the Bible (cf. Proverbs 31:4-7; 1 Timothy 5:23).
    - a) Their water supplies were often contaminated, leading to health problems. Even today, travelers in the Bible lands cannot drink the water because it can make them very sick.
    - b) Notice that Timothy had not been drinking wine; he started only when an apostle commanded it for his health.
  2. The strongest drink in the ancient world (before the days of distillation) was only about 7-10% alcohol. They had to drink a lot to get drunk. In fact, diluted wine would have had a significant effect on the bladder far before the brain. To compare today’s wines with those is mixing apples and oranges. They also often mixed water and wine (Isaiah 1:22). Today’s fortified wines have a 13-21% alcohol content level.
- C. What about Romans 14:21? If this passage argues that eating any meat in and of itself is not sinful, then it also argues that having a drink is not sinful either.
1. Romans 14:21 does not disagree with other scriptures. Paul had already stated that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking (vs. 17).
    - a) In other words, there are aspects of the kingdom more important than eating and drinking. God does not reign (“kingdom”) just so we may eat and drink!
    - b) Paul’s point is that the evidence of God’s reign in you is not affected by the food you eat, but by righteousness, peace, and the Holy Spirit.

2. We must be careful not to reject one whom God accepts (vs. 18). Therefore, we pursue what makes for peace and edification (vs. 19).
3. We must not destroy (the opposite of edification) the work of God for the sake of food (vs. 20). Some may insist on their rights; they should remember that God does not require us to eat every food, and eating some foods may cause weak brothers to stumble (vs. 15; cf. Matthew 18:6-7).
  - a) Social drinkers bear the greatest blame for influencing others to drink.
  - b) No one watches a drunk and decides to follow his example!
4. In this context, when Paul addresses eating meat (vs. 21), we do not automatically assume that the meat itself is evil. The problem is the weak brother's view of it. Why, then, should we assume the wine itself is evil (fermented)? Again, the problem is the weak brother's view of it. Paul also forbids "anything" by which a brother stumbles.
  - a) The word "anything" includes grape juice. If some were rejecting perfectly good food, would this not include those who reject perfectly good grape juice?
  - b) Since only the context defines the word, there is uncertainty that this refers to fermented wine. The context seems to point in the other direction.
  - c) This context agrees with Paul's own behavior (1 Corinthians 8:13; 9:20-22; 10:23, 31-33).
    - (1) The issue is not simply, "Is it lawful?" After deciding this, we must ask, "Is it helpful?" Paul carefully avoided "anything" that was not helpful to others.
    - (2) This passage is similar to Daniel 1:8, 10, 16. One possible reason why Daniel might have refused is because the food was first offered as a sacrifice to their gods. The same possibility exists in Romans 14.
5. Even if this was fermented wine, this was before the days of distillation, and their wine was often mixed with water. Modern wines are not equivalent.
6. Paul restates the problem in vs. 22-23.
  - a) The main concern in vs. 22 is the strong brother's concern for the weak brother.
  - b) The main concern in vs. 23 is the weak brother's concern for his own conscience.

**Conclusion.** Harold Gilliland of Alcoholics Anonymous says that 2 out of 7 people who start drinking become alcoholics. Those are not very good

odds. The only safe and certain way to avoid addiction is to never take the first drink!

Japanese Admiral Togo, whose brilliant tactics had destroyed the Russian fleet at the battle of the Sea of Japan in 1905, visited the United States shortly after the Russo-Japanese War. At a state dinner in Togo's honor, William Jennings Bryan was asked to propose a toast. Because Bryan was well known to drink a lot, some feared that an embarrassing breakdown of protocol was about to occur. But as Bryan stood to propose his toast, he held up his glass and said, "Admiral Togo has won a great victory on water, and I will therefore toast him in water. When Admiral Togo wins a victory on champagne, I will toast him in champagne." A person does not have to compromise his convictions because of peer pressure.