

# Alcohol

## (An Every-Verse Method Study)

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(All Bible quotes from the NASB, unless otherwise noted)

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From 1920 to 1933, the sale of alcohol was a violation of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. For over 100 years prior to the passage of this amendment, Christians led the crusade to abolish alcohol in America. During this crusade, their political objectives became one with their religious beliefs, and opposition to alcohol consumption became a staple of the Christian faith.

Christians haven't always opposed alcohol, however. The Puritans, who in the minds of most Americans represent religious rigidity more than anyone, actually loaded more beer and wine onto the Mayflower than they did water. They also served beer, brandy, gin, and wine at the first Thanksgiving celebration (1). So, even though they were strict in many other ways, the Puritans were far more lenient regarding alcohol consumption than most Evangelical/Fundamentalist churches are today.

Who's right? Whose beliefs better align with the messages that resonate throughout the Bible? The Puritans or the Evangelicals?

To gain biblical clarity on this issue, we must analyze it with the Every-Verse Method. In doing so, we will exclude verses that give no indication of God's feelings on alcohol consumption, such as Genesis (9:20-27), where Noah gets drunk and embarrasses himself. Neither will we cover ceremonial instructions, such as those applying to priests in the Tent of Meeting (Leviticus 10:9) or to Nazirite vows (Numbers 6). These ceremonial laws were wiped out by Jesus' sacrifice for our sins on the cross. We will

only examine verses that help us determine God's will regarding alcohol consumption today.

**Deuteronomy 14:26**, “And 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.”

**Context:** God instructs the Israelites to set aside a tenth of their harvest for a celebration. This is often referred to as the Festival Tithe.

**Analysis:** God's first mention of alcoholic drink is a positive one. He created it for our enjoyment.

**Deuteronomy 21:18-21**, “If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town. And they shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey us; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all of the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear of it and fear.”

**Context:** Various laws of God are presented in these chapters of Deuteronomy.

**Analysis:** This is the Bible's first mention of alcohol in conjunction with sin. Alcohol is absent from the laws of Exodus and Leviticus, which precede Deuteronomy. The focus of this passage is not alcohol itself, but rather, the sin of being disobedient to parents—a sin that breaks one of the Ten Commandments. No sound-minded parent would recommend that their child ruin himself with a hedonistic, self-destructive lifestyle abusing both food and alcohol. Here in this verse, drinking alcoholic beverages is no more of a sin than eating food (gluttony), but the abuse of either can be the ruin of any person.

**Judges 13:3-5**, “Then the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman, and said to her, ‘Behold, you are barren and have born no children, but you shall conceive and give

birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines.”

**Context:** The angel of the Lord gives instructions to the mother of Samson regarding the son she would soon deliver. The Nazirite designation set Samson apart from other people. Samson would go on to become one of the Old Testament’s great heroes. He is best known today for his long hair that gave him strength, and for his encounter with Delilah.

**Analysis:** At this point in time, Samson’s mother was the only person in all of Israel who was prohibited from drinking wine, and that was only during her pregnancy. Since we now know how alcohol can hurt a developing fetus, it’s quite possible that God forbade alcohol consumption here so that Samson would be born physically superior to other babies. However, we cannot be certain of God’s reasoning, since the Bible gives no explanation. What we do know is that this was an isolated case of alcohol abstinence.

**Proverbs 20:1,** “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler; and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.”

**Context:** No real context here, as Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings which apply to all people at all times.

**Analysis:** To be intoxicated by alcohol is not considered a sin here, but it is considered unwise. When drunk, some people do foolish things they ordinarily would not.

**Proverbs 21:17,** “He who loves pleasure will become a poor man; He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.”

**Analysis:** Pleasure, wine, and oil are associated with feasting. Those who indulge in pleasure too frequently tend to be unproductive.

**Proverbs 23:20**, “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 cloth a man with rags.”

**Analysis:** This verse’s focus is not alcohol, but the unproductiveness of pleasure-seeking. Drunkenness is often associated with gluttony in the Bible. It’s not a sin to drink alcohol or to eat food. It may not even be a sin to experience an isolated episode of drunkenness any more than it is a sin to overeat at a holiday dinner. It is a sin, however, to lead a lifestyle of pleasure-seeking. We cannot seek pleasure and be productive at the same time. We need not look far in today’s world to find people whose party lifestyles get in the way of something as basic as holding a job.

**Proverbs 23:29-35**, “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long over wine; those who go to taste mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly. At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, and your mind will utter perverse things, and you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea, or like one who lies down on the top of a mast. ‘They struck me, but I did not become ill; they beat me, but I did not know it. When shall I awake so I can find another drink?’”

**Analysis:** The line, “Do not look on wine when it is red” does not mean that it’s a sin to look at wine, as some have suggested. These verses use exaggerations to make a point and are not to be taken literally. Their examples of hallucinations, confusion, and foolish acts never result from moderate alcohol consumption.

This quote opposes alcohol abuse and proves that it was every bit as much of a problem 3,000 years ago as it is today.

**Proverbs 31:4-7**, “It is not for Kings, O Lemuel: It is not for kings to drink wine or for rulers to desire strong drink, lest they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of the afflicted. Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him

whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his trouble no more.”

**Context:** This proverb is not from Solomon, but from the mother of King Lemuel.

**Analysis:** The point here is that kings should not abuse alcohol, because it will lead them to become evil and oppressive. Again, this verse does not oppose moderate consumption, because moderate consumption does not cause memory loss and poor judgment.

It’s surprising to see a Bible verse recommend that the poor drink to forget their misery. We should not apply this message to the American poor who have an opportunity to better themselves and positively impact the lives of others. The poor in this passage were likely to have been suffering slaves who had no hope for their future on earth.

**Song of Solomon 8:2,** “I would lead you and bring you into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me; I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates.”

**Context:** Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) is an eight-chapter love poem that is ignored by most Christians due to its erotic nature. The words in this verse are spoken by the woman in the poem.

**Analysis:** The fact that alcohol is mentioned in passing is proof that drinking wine (at least in moderation) was acceptable and undisputed in Solomon’s time.

**Isaiah 5:11-12,** “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! And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine; but they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands.”

**Context:** Chapter five lists various woes to those who indulge in sin.

**Analysis:** This text addresses the full time partier. Drinking wine is no more of a sin here than playing a tambourine, harp, flute, or lyre. God’s displeasure was in people

partying their lives away and taking no time to think about God and what He had done for them. Clearly, people haven't changed since the days of Isaiah.

**Isaiah 5:22-23**, “Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink; who justify the wicked for a bribe, and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!”

**Analysis:** Even in the days of Isaiah, the biggest alcohol abusers were cheered on by other drinkers for their drinking accomplishments (again, nothing has changed). Also, God associates alcohol abuse among those in power with the injustices that they commit.

**Isaiah 28:1**, “Woe to the proud crown of the drunkards of Ephraim, and to the fading flower of its glorious beauty, which is at the head of the fertile valley of those who are overcome with wine.”

**Context:** Samaria, the capital of Ephraim, was a luxurious city where the wealthy and the powerful enjoyed the high life.

**Analysis:** Here, the Bible associates drunkenness with those who have prospered and revel in the resulting luxury. Prosperity is the result of hard work, but those who prosper often indulge themselves in pleasure until they lose what had been gained.

**Isaiah 28:7-8**, “And these also reel with wine and stagger from strong drink. The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink. They are confused by wine; they stagger from strong drink. They reel while having visions. They totter when rendering judgment; for all the tables are full of filthy vomit, without a single clean place.”

**Context:** The prophecy against Ephraim continues.

**Analysis:** The Lord paints a vivid picture of the debauchery of Ephraim's religious leaders, who apparently had little concern for the ways of the Lord, but had lots of interest in their own pleasure.

**Jeremiah 35:1-2**, “The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, saying, ‘Go to the house of the Rechabites,

and speak to them, and bring them into the house of the Lord, into one of the chambers, and give them wine to drink.”

**Jeremiah 35:6-7**, “But they said, ‘We will not drink wine, for Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us, saying, ‘You shall not drink wine, you or your sons forever; and you shall not build a house, and you shall not sow seed, and you shall not plant a vineyard or own one; but in tents you shall dwell all your days, that you may live many days in the land where you sojourn.’””

**Jeremiah 35:14**, “The words of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons not to drink wine, are observed. So they do not drink wine to this day, for they have obeyed their father’s command. But I have spoken to you again and again; yet you have not listened to Me.”

**Context:** As a form of prophecy, God instructs Jeremiah to put this family to the test by offering them wine, since they had been obedient to their father’s command not to drink it. They remain steadfast by refusing to drink, and God uses their obedience as an example of how the people of Judah should obey their heavenly Father.

**Analysis:** From this story we know that, even in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C., people practiced abstinence from alcohol, even though it was not required by the law of God.

**Joel 1:5**, “Awake drunkards and weep; and wail, all you wine drinkers, on account of the sweet wine that is cut off from your mouth.”

**Context:** Chapter 1 of Joel prophesies a severe locust plague which would, among other things, destroy the grape crop from which the wine was made.

**Analysis:** There’s no alcohol message here, but there’s an anti-drunkard undertone.

**Joel 3:3**, “They have also cast lots for My people, traded a boy for a harlot, and sold a girl for wine that they may drink.”

**Context:** Most of this chapter prophesies judgment against the nation that conquered Judah (the southern half of the kingdom of Israel). This nation, Babylon, sold Jewish children into slavery in return for wine and prostitutes.

**Analysis:** Once again, alcohol is not the focus. God is angry at Babylon for having such little regard for His children's lives that they would throw them away in exchange for pleasure.

**Amos 6:6-7**, "...who drink wine from sacrificial bowls while they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph."

**Context:** Chapter 6 rebukes the complacency of the people of Israel during a time of prosperity.

**Analysis:** In addition to the drinking of wine, this chapter also lists lounging on couches, eating lambs, and playing the harp as elements of a hedonistic lifestyle that distracted the Israelites from paying proper attention to God.

**Micah 2:11**, "If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods, saying, 'I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,' such a one would be the preacher for this people!" (NRSV)

**Context:** Micah prophecies against Israel prior to the northern Kingdom's fall to Assyria. This was a period in which the entire nation paid little attention to God.

**Analysis:** Hmmm. Do you think a prophet promoting wine and beer would be popular today? Maybe not among Christians, but I'm sure everyone else would like him. The point of this verse is that the people only wanted to hear prophecies of prosperity and God's favor, not the realities of His anger over their godless ways.

**Habakkuk 2:15-16**, "Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, who mix in your venom even to make them drunk, so as to look on their nakedness! You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor. Now you yourself drink and expose your own nakedness. The cup of the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter disgrace will come upon your glory."

**Context:** This prophecy is directed toward the nation of Babylon, which would soon conquer Judah.

**Analysis:** The drunkenness and nakedness is an analogy of how Babylon abused its neighbors.



**Zechariah 9:17**, “For what comeliness and beauty will be theirs! Grain will make the young men flourish, and new wine the virgins.”

**Context:** Zechariah prophecies to the Jews after their return from the Babylonian captivity. In this chapter, God’s prophecy is one of a bright future for Judah.

**Analysis:** Wine is mentioned in a positive light, and it is associated with prosperity.

**Matthew 11:18-19**, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard; a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

**Context:** Jesus is saying that the religious leaders of His day rejected both the ministries of John the Baptist, who fasted and abstained from feasts and from drinking alcohol, and of Jesus, who did not fast during His ministry, attended feasts, and drank wine. Either ministry would have been an acceptable path to knowing God, but the religious leaders remained unwilling to change their ways by accepting either one.

**Analysis:** The fact that John the Baptist and his disciples abstained from wine proves that others in Jesus’ day believed alcohol consumption to be a sin. The Pharisees also thought it inappropriate for a holy man to drink wine. That’s why they called Jesus a drunkard. Jesus openly defied this man-made standard for holiness and showed everyone that a holy man follows God’s standards for holiness, not man’s. God’s standards require that we love others, not that we follow man-made rules about what to eat and drink.

**John 2:9-10**, “...the headwaiter called the bridegroom, and said to him, ‘Every man serves the good wine first, and when men have drunk freely, then that which is poorer; you have kept the good wine until now.’”

**Context:** This is the last verse of the story of Jesus’ first miracle, in which He turned water into wine at a wedding.

**Analysis:** This story does not say that Jesus drank wine at the wedding, but the fact that He created it for others proves that He allowed its consumption. What’s even

more remarkable is that He turned water into wine at a wedding, an occasion in which people tend to over-indulge. This may indicate that Jesus permitted drunkenness on special occasions, much like gluttony is permitted at a feast. This approach is consistent with the Old Testament, in which God denounces drunkenness in conjunction with other indulgences (like music, lounging on couches, and gluttony) that lead people to fruitlessness and self-destruction. God permitted these pleasures at weddings and appointed feasts, but He opposed indulgence in pleasure as a way of life.

If we accept this interpretation, we are free to occasionally have a few too many drinks, but we must take care not live a life of pleasure-seeking in which we waste our time on alcohol, TV, movies, sports, fishing, and other hobbies. Christians who abstain from alcohol, but allow entertainment to dominate their lives, anger God far more than Christians who consume alcohol, but do some good in the world in Christ's name. It doesn't matter whether it's the pleasure of alcohol that holds us back or the pleasure of gardening, video games, or shopping for clothes, all are unproductive for Christ. In biblical times, people didn't have all the fun hobbies and activities that we have today, so they would entertain themselves by getting drunk. Today, we can waste our lives on pleasure without ever tasting alcohol.

Many *not-one-drop-of-alcohol* Christians have said that this wine that Jesus created (as well as the wine that He drank in other verses) was unfermented grape juice. Not only is there no evidence whatsoever to support this claim, but in this verse, the master of the banquet refers to Jesus' wine as "good wine." He says that when people have had too much good wine to drink, then the cheap wine is served. In other words, people eventually become too drunk from the good wine to be able to taste the difference when they drink the cheap stuff. So what kind of wine contained alcohol leading to drunkenness? The good wine! What kind of wine did Jesus create? The good wine! There's a huge taste difference between alcoholic "good wine" and unfermented grape juice. The master of the banquet would have been disappointed with the grape juice.

**1 Corinthians 5:11**, "But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even eat with such a one."

**Context:** In this chapter, the Apostle Paul addresses the matter of a Christian who was having sex with his stepmother. The members of the Church had apparently found this behavior to be acceptable, so Paul is understandably upset. He reminds them that he had previously instructed them not to associate with church members who practiced various sinful ways.

**Analysis:** Simply another example of how God is opposed to a lifestyle of drunkenness.

**1 Corinthians 6:9-10,** “Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.”

**Context:** In chapter 6, Paul writes to the Corinthian church for believers not to sue each other or continue wronging and defrauding one another. Paul then again lists some of the practices in which we wrong other Christians.

**Analysis:** How do we wrong others when we abuse alcohol? Ruined marriages, drunken-driving accidents, abusive parenting, lost jobs, fighting, etc. Alcohol abuse is a serious sin, but that fact never convinced God to forbid moderate alcohol consumption.

**Galatians 5:19-21,** “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 shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”

**Context:** Paul instructs these Christians to follow the ways of the Holy Spirit rather than follow the desires of the flesh. These fleshly desires that he lists are the equivalent of animalistic selfishness—doing whatever feels good without regard for the negative effects that such behavior has on others.

**Analysis:** Drunkenness is cited as one of the many ways in which we lose self-control and succumb to the desires of the flesh. Notice that disputes, which are common among Christians, especially between members of different denominations, are on the same level as drunkenness.

**Ephesians 5:18**, “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit.” (NRSV)

**Context:** In chapter 5, Paul encourages the Ephesians to live according to God’s will and discourages them from giving in to their selfish and destructive desires.

**Analysis:** In verse 15, Paul advises the Ephesians to make the most of every opportunity. He then follows by discouraging drunkenness here in verse 18. Being alert and active enough to take advantage of ministry opportunities is impossible when we indulge in recreational desires. Again, he refers to drunkenness, not moderate alcohol consumption, as debauchery—a lifestyle of indulgence.

**Colossians 2:16-17**, “Therefore, let no one act as a judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things of which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”

**Colossians 2:20-23**, “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit to decrees such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ (which all refer to things destined to perish with the using)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”

**Context:** Paul says to the Colossians in **Verse 2:8**, “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ,” as he warns them to avoid man-made rules that serve no purpose. Paul spends most of Colossians refuting a heresy that likely included aspects of Gnosticism (a religion that believed that the spirit world is good and the physical world is evil; therefore, Gnostics could not believe that the Son of God would dwell in evil human flesh).

**Analysis:** The “drink” mentioned in verse 16 is most likely alcoholic, since cultures and religions rarely regulated non-alcoholic drink. Paul makes it clear that such regulations are of no value.

Paul could have done what many modern-day Christians do by telling the church that it's okay to promote these man-made alcohol consumption rules as a part of Christianity, but he didn't. God doesn't want us to play it safe by erring on the side of too many rules. He wants us to be free from rules that originate from anyone other than Him.

**1 Timothy 3:2-3**, “An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money.”

**Titus 1:7**, “For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain.”

**Context:** The Apostle Paul gives advice on what type of character is best for leaders in the church.

**Titus 2:3**, “Older women likewise are to be revered in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good.”

**Context:** Paul gives instructions for the personal conduct of both young and old women.

**Analysis:** To become addicted (or enslaved) to wine (or any other form of alcohol) takes at least five years of abuse (2). Moderate consumption never results in addiction.

**1 Timothy 5:23**, “No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”

**Context:** This verse appears to be unrelated to the verses that precede and follow it.

**Analysis:** This is the only biblical instance in which someone is instructed to drink wine. It appears that even 2,000 years ago, people were aware of wine's health benefits.

It's odd that well-meaning modern-day Christians often recommend soda over wine. Soda has no nutritional value, and can only be harmful to the digestive system.

**1 Peter 4:3**, “For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.”

**Context:** Peter encourages the believers to leave their old way of life behind and live as God desires.

**Analysis:** The pursuit of drunkenness may be a way of life for non-Christians, but it’s not a lifestyle fitting for a Christian.

So there you have it: every Bible verse that reveals how God feels about alcohol consumption. Of these 34 verses, none prohibit moderate alcohol consumption, but 22 of them indicate that God hates alcohol abuse.

From these verses we see that alcohol abuse was as big a problem in biblical times as it is today, and that some people considered it wise to abstain from alcohol as some people do today, so we have no reason to deny moderate alcohol consumption under the claim that times have changed.

### **The Freedom Defeaters**

How did we get from the biblical allowance of alcohol consumption to the modern-day, Evangelical church’s prohibition of it? We need to look no further than the Freedom Defeaters, which I described in the Christian Freedom study.

Many anti-alcohol Christians deny our biblical freedom to consume alcohol on the grounds that a person’s first taste of it may someday lead to alcoholism, the lifestyle of drunkenness God opposes. They say, “You can’t become an alcoholic if you never take the first drink.” That’s why I categorize this non-biblical belief as a *sin-preventionism*. Just as the Pharisees created religious rules to keep God’s people from coming anywhere close to sin, many churches today do the same by forbidding alcohol consumption. How did Jesus deal with these sin-preventionisms that robbed God’s people of their freedoms? As we saw in the Christian Freedom study, He opposed them and broke them in plain view of everyone.

Some may say, “Where do you draw the line between drinking alcohol in a reasonable manner and the drunkenness that God clearly despises?” It’s this desire to

have a sin-boundary that classifies alcohol consumption as a *measurable sin*. Since God has given us no boundary between moderate consumption and drunkenness, some of us create our own boundary at the starting line by prohibiting the consumption of *any* alcohol. Why does God leave us without a sin-boundary? Since God “is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart [Hebrews 4:12],” He draws the line based upon our intentions, not our deeds. Two people could drink the same amount of alcohol, one because he wants to get drunk, and the other because he is thirsty, and God would count the first act as sin and the second as permissible.

As we saw in the Old Testament, gluttony also counts as sin. Most churches ignore it, because they cannot prohibit the eating of food, since we need food to live. This inability to set a sin-boundary doesn’t make gluttony any less of a sin in God’s eyes, however. To be free of gluttony, we must exercise self-control. To many Christians, self-control equals abstinence, but that’s not how God sees it. To Him, we exercise self-control when we enjoy good things in moderation, and alcohol is one of those good things.

Some Christians deny moderate alcohol consumption, because they believe that God is pleased when we forsake pleasure. That’s why alcohol abstinence is sometimes a *penitent deed*. As I stated before, we never have to give up a non-sinful pleasure to please or appease God, because Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for our sins perfectly justifies us in God’s sight. Now that we are justified, we are to become more like Jesus, and Jesus consumed alcohol moderately.

Some churches want Christians to abstain from alcohol as a means of *wearing the Christian uniform*, an outward appearance that makes one’s Christianity clear to others. They believe that a Christian who refuses to drink alcohol in a public setting will serve as a witness to others. When others ask, “Why don’t you drink alcohol?” your answer of, “I’m not allowed to drink it because I’m a Christian,” is somehow supposed to make them want to become Christians. However, they usually think, “I’m glad I’m not a Christian,” when they realize that becoming one would require them to abstain from alcohol for the rest of their lives.

To the contrary, I find that drinking alcohol in moderation is a great witness to non-Christians. Their surprised reaction provides me an opportunity to tell them that

Christianity isn't a bunch of pointless rules, but that its laws are designed to prevent us from harming one another out of selfishness. Having the freedom to drink alcohol provides better opportunities to share one's faith than alcohol abstinence does.

I'm not saying that all Christians must drink alcohol as a statement to the world that alcohol prohibition is anti-biblical. It's perfectly okay to abstain from alcohol, just as it was for John the Baptist and the Rechabites. However, the church must stop preaching that alcohol consumption is a sin, because, first of all, such a message is untrue, and second, it keeps some people away from the faith. While we Christians might argue that knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior far surpasses any enjoyment that alcoholic drinks might provide, those who do not yet know Christ will fail to see this point. We must not place "stumbling blocks" (a term used in Matthew 18) in the middle of the road that leads to Jesus. It's fine for Jesus to be a stumbling block to some people, as the Bible says He is, but it's not fine for a man-made rule to be a stumbling block that trips people before they ever get to Him.

### **The Defiled Conscience Principle**

Some Christians oppose moderate alcohol consumption, even though they admit that the Bible allows it. They have one card up their collective sleeve that robs us of the freedoms that God lets us enjoy. I call it the *Defiled Conscience Principle*.

It's based, in part, on a verse that has become one of the most distorted and misused in the Scriptures. We need to pay special attention to it, and its related verses, by examining its context at length. Here it is:

**Romans 14:21**, "It is not good to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which by which your brother stumble."

**Context & Analysis:** At first glance, when taken out of context, this verse appears to instruct us to refrain from doing anything that might lead a fellow Christian to sin, and that makes sense. Leading others to sin (stumble) is a sin in itself, as Jesus said, "...whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea [Matthew 18:6]." Yet we know that the law permits eating meat and drinking wine. To



understand how it could have led some Christians to sin, we must examine this verse's historical context.

Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 & 10 discuss the issue of whether or not Christians were permitted to eat meat that might have been offered to an idol (a Greek or Roman god). Some Christians ate meat while others abstained from it. Paul explains in Romans 14 that both approaches are fine, as long as God receives proper thanks. Before the writing of Romans, however, Acts 15 and 1 Corinthians 8 & 10 (which was written before Romans) addressed the same issue:

**Acts 15:28-29**, “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourself free from these things, you will do well.”

**Context & Analysis:** These verses are the last part of a letter that Jesus' Apostles sent to the early churches. This letter was written at the Council of Jerusalem, where the Apostles, including Paul, assembled to resolve debated issues within the church. The big debate was over whether or not non-Jewish (Gentile) Christians had to be circumcised, as the Jews had always been. The Holy Spirit showed the Apostles that circumcision was unnecessary.

The Apostles explain in this letter that their intent was to burden the Gentile converts with nothing more than essential practices. The practices from which they had to abstain were not random or unrelated. All practices forbidden by verses 28 & 29 were elements of the Greco-Roman worship services. The Gentile-Christians had, of course, converted from the Greco-Roman polytheistic religions, in which they worshipped such gods as Zeus, Mars, Aphrodite, and Apollo. Their worship rituals consisted of killing animals by means of strangling, drinking their blood, eating their meat, getting drunk on wine (thus, the mention of wine in Romans 14:21), and having sex with temple prostitutes, all while worshipping the statue of one of these man-made gods.

Why were these practices forbidden for those who converted to Christianity? The reason is obvious: Gentile converts who participated in these practices might have communed with their former gods by doing so and been tempted to return to them. Even

if they didn't fall away from the Christian faith entirely, they would have violated the first and greatest commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

**1 Corinthians 8:4-5**, "Therefore, concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and lords, yet for us, there is but one God..."

**Analysis:** Paul begins by saying that these Roman and Greek gods are imaginary; but even if they are real, they're not the true God of the universe. Eating meat sacrificed to these fake gods had no spiritual effect. Christians were permitted to eat this meat as long as they didn't do it as an act of worship.

Despite the Jerusalem Council's orders for Gentile converts to abstain from meat offered to idols, Paul (and maybe some other Christian leaders) had apparently allowed Christians to do defy those orders. As he learned of the resulting damage to the Corinthian church, however, he may have realized that allowing meat consumption was a mistake. Remember, only Jesus was without sin. The rest of us, even the Apostle Paul, make mistakes.

**1 Corinthians 8:7**, "However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."

**Context & Analysis:** When people ate meat from a sacrifice in a Roman temple, they did so at a table that included a setting for the god whom they worshipped (3). In their minds, the god was with them at the table and nowhere else in the universe. Remember, they were polytheistic, so they didn't believe in an omnipresent god who was everywhere at the same time. They were likely overwhelmed with a sense of their god's presence more than many of us are, since we believe that God is everywhere when we worship Him.

Meat was a key element of the worship experience, because Romans rarely ate meat outside the temple, since they had no means of preserving it. Whatever meat they ate had to be fresh, and the easiest place to find fresh meat was at the temple (that's why

Christians went to the temples; they certainly didn't go to worship). Therefore, whenever they ate meat, regardless of whether or not it had been sacrificed to a Greco-Roman god, they communed with their gods in their hearts and minds.

To compare this experience to something we encounter today, let's consider Holy Communion. Many of us Christians have practiced it our entire lives and have had powerful worship experiences doing so. Imagine going to a non-Christian function, such a company picnic, and being served wine/grape juice in a tiny, clear plastic cup along with a little square of bread no longer than an inch. Where would your mind go at that point? Could you eat it without feeling a connection to Christ or feeling as though it's necessary to commune with Him at that moment? Many of us could not eat that bread and drink from that little cup without communing with God in our hearts. Likewise, those who had converted from Greco-Roman polytheism to Christianity could not eat meat without communing with their former gods in their hearts.

**1 Corinthians 8:9-11**, "But take care, lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge, he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died."

**Context & Analysis:** This verse is a big favorite of anti-alcohol Christians. They take verse 10 and make substitutions by saying, "If someone sees you in a place that serves alcohol, even if you're just having a soda, they may be encouraged to drink alcohol, and thus sin against their conscience." So they not only forbid the drinking of alcohol, but with this analogy, they prohibit Christians from going out dancing, singing karaoke, playing pool, or doing a number of other innocent activities that take place where alcohol is served. By ignoring the original context and intentions of these verses, many Christians lay burdens upon other Christians that greatly exceed those imposed by the Bible.

Some Christians assume that these verses tell us to do nothing with which other Christians may disagree, because those Christians might be tempted to go against their beliefs and imitate us. This assumption is far-fetched. The chances of an anti-alcohol

Christian changing his or her behavior based on seeing another Christian drink alcohol are incredibly slim. First of all, anti-alcohol Christians are unlikely to be found in a place that serves alcohol, since they don't believe it's okay to be there, so they're unlikely to see other Christians drink. And even if they did, they'd be more likely to pass judgment on that person as a lesser Christian than they would be to follow that person's lead. Also, most anti-alcohol Christians feel so strongly about their anti-alcohol beliefs that they're unlikely to be swayed, regardless of what examples or contrary evidence are set before them.

In verse 9, Paul contrasts the freedom of those who are strong in faith with the temptation of those who are weak in faith. Notice here that the strong-in-faith are the *can-do* Christians, and the weak-in faith are the *can't-do* Christians. The experienced Christians, mentored by Jesus' own disciples, who know what the Gospel is all about, have the fewest rules to follow. They know it's okay to eat meat. But the new converts, who may be easily led astray, feel that they have to abstain from it. Nonetheless, Paul tells the strong-in-faith to make sacrifices for the weak-in-faith, because the weak-in-faith are more likely to fall away.

Today, many churches take the opposite approach: The supposedly strong-in-faith, the leaders of the religious establishment, are the *can't-do* Christians who show no mercy on the weak-in-faith—the new (and often young) believers. The strong-in-faith heap loads of man-made restrictions on the weak-in-faith, until the weak-in-faith fall away and are, therefore, “ruined,” as Paul describes in verse 11. When young adult Christians are prohibited from dancing, singing karaoke, etc, because of where alcohol is served, and all they get to do is go to prayer night, many of them fall away. They have too much energy to spend all of their free time sitting in church, sitting in Bible studies, sitting in prayer meetings, sitting and reading the Bible, sitting while talking about the Bible, etc.

Those who are strong-in-faith might argue that young Christians need not have fun, because if their faith is strong enough, they'll realize that Jesus is all they need. This mentality burdens the weak-in-faith by holding them to the standards of the strong-in-faith, just like the Corinthian church leaders pressured the weak-in-faith to live up to their standards and eat meat without faith-damaging results. Today, the strong-in-faith need to

realize that today's weak-in-faith may fall away as a result of ultra-high standards, just like the Corinthian weak-in-faith did.

**1 Corinthians 8:12-13**, “And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.”

**Context & Analysis:** Many anti-alcohol Christians use this verse to say that Christians may never drink alcohol, because doing so might cause other Christians to stumble and wound their consciences. This misinterpretation results from the fact that we take the words “stumble” and “wound” too lightly. They refer not to a little trip or scrape, but to something far more serious. Here, the weak-in-faith stumble and wound their consciences by communing with their former gods in their hearts when eating meat—an outright violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment. God make it clear throughout the Bible that He hates when we worship other gods. So the stumble here is not just a little trip, but a fall causing serious injury that jeopardizes the eternal life of a new believer.

The seriousness of this scenario lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the minor issue of whether or not it's okay to drink alcohol. These Bible quotes have nothing to do with feeling a little guilty about doing something that we used to think was wrong but now believe is right.

**1 Corinthians 10:23-24**, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.”

**Context & Analysis:** Paul again discusses the issue of eating meat offered to idols. This quote reiterates Jesus' command to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Some Christians use this verse to claim that any neutral activity is forbidden. In other words, if drinking alcohol neither helps nor hurts one's faith, it's a sin. If listening to secular music neither helps nor hurts one's faith, it's a sin. However, I have never seen a Christian apply this verse universally. If changing from glasses to contact lenses neither helps nor hurts one's faith, is that a sin? If cutting the lawn neither helps nor hurts one's faith, is

that a sin? Of course not! There are plenty of neutral activities which we engage in on a daily basis, and God permits them. This verse does not prohibit engagement in sin-free activities. It prohibits the seeking of our own pleasure at the expense of someone else's well-being.

When Paul writes, "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable," he means that some behaviors not forbidden by God's law can seriously endanger someone else's faith. Eating meat was one of these, as were lawsuits. In **1 Corinthians 6:7**, Paul charges, "Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" Lawsuits were legal, but they destroyed relationships within the church and demonstrated to the outside world that Christians could not live in harmony. Unlike lawsuits, moderate alcohol consumption harms nobody's faith or physical well-being.

These common misinterpretations of verses in 1 Corinthians 8 & 10 and Romans 14 (which I did not quote because it really adds nothing more to this issue, but feel free to open your Bible and read it) lead us astray when we are merely Bible-based rather than thoroughly biblical. But when we examine the other 34 alcohol passages, as we already have, we won't make the mistake of building a theology out of this one example, which isn't even about alcohol to begin with.

### **Universal Application**

While many Christians employ the Defiled Conscience Principle when opposing alcohol consumption, no Christian applies it universally. With the many denominations and the differing beliefs among Christians today, it's impossible to avoid practicing something that other Christians believe to be wrong.

For example, the Church of Christ denomination refuses to incorporate musical instruments into their worship services. If that's the case, then all churches who promote the Defiled Conscience Principle when denouncing alcohol consumption should also abstain from using musical instruments in worship services. Otherwise, people from the Church of Christ might visit a church that uses musical instruments and be tempted to participate in a worship service that includes them. By participating, they defile their consciences by doing something that they had always believed to be wrong.

Here's another example: some Christians believe it's wrong for a woman to wear pants or shorts, and that women of all ages must wear a dress or skirt. Many anti-alcohol Christians, however, have no problem with women wearing pants or shorts. So if anti-alcohol Christian women were to apply the Defiled Conscience Principle universally, they would refrain from wearing pants or shorts, because women who think it's a sin to wear them might be encouraged by their example and do the same. They would then sin against their consciences by doing what they had always believed to be wrong.

Don't look at these examples and decide that you must now avoid all practices that others believe to be sinful. Before doing that, consider the example that Jesus set: Jesus was without sin, and yet He never preached or practiced the Defiled Conscience Principle. For example, Jesus openly ate without first washing His hands, as we discussed in Christian Freedom study. Was Jesus concerned that people who had grown up under the influence of the Pharisees, who had always believed that eating with unwashed hands was a sin, would be encouraged to follow His example and sin against their consciences by doing so? Of course not! Jesus was concerned with separating the Word of God from the rules of man so that God's people could live in truth and freedom. Jesus also defied the Defiled Conscience Principle when He did good works on the Sabbath, picked grain on the Sabbath, drank wine, and befriended known sinners. By this we know that the Defiled Conscience Principle is not required by God. If it were, then Jesus would have been a sinner by defying it.

Martin Luther could not have launched the Protestant Reformation if he had obeyed the Defiled Conscience Principle. When his followers first repented of their sins directly to God, rather than through a priest, refused to pay indulgences to the church, and left the Roman Catholic Church altogether, most of them probably felt a little tweak of their consciences, because they practiced something they were raised to believe was wrong. They probably had second thoughts and wrestled with whether or not to break away from the non-biblical ways of the Roman Catholic Church. Had Luther been concerned with matters of conscience, the church could not have advanced in the direction of God's will.

The same is true today. If we apply the Defiled Conscience Principle to all things, we can never remove man-made religious rules from the church, because any time we

turn Christians from the false doctrines of men to the truth of God, some of them will feel guilty when embracing freedoms that they once thought were sins. That's okay, however, because God wants us to be free. It's those who wish to keep us in chains who misapply the Defiled Conscience Principle to issues for which it was never intended.

## **Non-biblical anti-alcohol arguments**

### **Temptation of Alcoholics**

Some Christians say we should avoid alcohol, because former alcoholics might see us drinking it, be inspired to drink it themselves, and then struggle with their addiction all over again. If we were to apply this principle universally, we would refuse to serve doughnuts and other sweets in Sunday school classes, because type II diabetics might be encouraged to eat them and suffer further complications to their health. We would have to abstain from peanuts too, because someone with a peanut allergy might see us eating them and be inspired to do so themselves, and then die from their allergic reaction. These examples sound preposterous, because they are—just like the idea that an alcoholic might return to alcoholism if we drink alcohol. It's a fact of life that alcoholics, diabetics, and food allergy sufferers realize that they cannot eat and drink everything that other people do. We do not sin by enjoying food or drink that somebody else might not be able to have.

### **Alcohol is a Drug**

Some people argue that alcohol consumption is a sin because alcohol is a drug. If that's the case, then churches had better stop making coffee available at Sunday school classes, because caffeine is a drug too. Fortunately, we don't have to junk our coffee-makers, because the Bible never opposes drugs. We have numerous drugs in our society, and only a small percentage of them are illegal. The rest of them are on the shelves at the grocery store or behind the counter at the pharmacy. Both legal and illegal drugs are harmful if abused. However, most of these drugs, including alcohol, have health benefits when used in moderation.



### **Alcohol is addictive**

Some people argue that alcohol is addictive. But as drugs go, it's hardly addictive at all. I've never known of a moderate drinker who became an alcoholic. It's the long-time alcohol abusers who do that. Research has shown that people must abuse alcohol for more than 5 years to become physically addicted to it (2). In fact, I've known quite a few people who abused alcohol in college and beyond, and none of them had trouble reducing or eliminating their drinking if they did so by the age of 30. So alcohol's minimally addictive nature is no cause for concern for those of us who obey the Bible by drinking it moderately.

### **Some People have a Genetic Tendency toward Alcoholism**

Some might say that alcoholism is hereditary, and nobody should taste alcohol, because those with a genetic disposition toward alcoholism will be hooked on it when they do. However, recent research suggests that this genetic tendency does not create an unusually high craving for alcohol like an addicted smoker might have for a cigarette, but that it minimizes the negative effects of alcohol abuse, such as hangovers (4). So it's just the allure of pleasure with no pain that leads to alcohol abuse, not a genetic disposition toward instant addiction. It's no different than my temptation to eat a whole bag of jalapeño potato chips everyday. If we want to maintain or achieve good health, we have to know when to say when.

Christians who drink alcohol moderately face no risk of addiction. Further minimizing this risk is the fact that we Christians have a purpose in life. Most alcohol abusers live for the pleasure of the moment, because they have nothing else to live for. If they stopped partying, their lives would be empty. Today, we see this more than ever as the media spotlights wealthy people who live the wild life because they have no goals. They have everything they could want or need, and they have no desire to be a positive force in the world, because they have no Christian ethics. But we Christians have so much purpose in our lives that we should have no time to abuse alcohol. Also, if we seek to obey God, we will heed the 22 Bible verses opposing alcohol abuse.

### **Why?**

It's worth asking why God, who hates alcohol abuse, allows His people to drink alcoholic beverages at all. The Bible provides no answer to this question, and we should be content in trusting God's decision. But the answer may very well be that God's approach simply works best.

It's likely that the United States' alcohol abuse problem is the result of its anti-alcohol history. Less than one hundred years ago, alcohol was strictly forbidden in the United States. And yet, less than a century later, alcoholism in the U.S. is an epidemic. Contrast that to Israel's and Italy's alcoholism rates, which are among the lowest in the world (5). Both of these countries take the scriptural approach to alcohol consumption, because Italy is Roman Catholic and Israel is Jewish. Their cultures tolerate the consumption of alcohol with meals and in religious services, but oppose its abuse. They are proof that God's approach works. America's high alcoholism rates are proof that prohibition fails.

There may be a psychological reason that explains why the biblical approach works and prohibition fails. I call it the Forbidden Fruit Syndrome. Just as Adam and Eve thought the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden must have been something special, many Christians, raised in anti-alcohol households, feel the same way about alcohol. When parents teach that alcohol consumption is a big deal, whether it's a great big deal or a terrible big deal, it becomes a big deal in the minds of their children. While some of these children choose to never taste alcohol, others succumb to the allure of the forbidden fruit and are controlled by it, because it was such a big deal in their minds all along.

Compare this to the household in which I grew up. My parents rarely talked about alcohol. They would buy a bottle of wine for New Year's Eve, drink half of it, and let it sit in the back of the refrigerator until the next New Year's Eve, when they would finish it. The message that my sisters and I received was that alcohol was no big deal. Our parents even let us have some wine, so we could see for ourselves that it was no big deal. While I'm not a child psychologist, I believe that my parents' approach toward alcohol is the best approach. If parents glorify or condemn alcohol, they run a greater risk of their children becoming alcoholics, because they make alcohol consumption a big deal in their children's minds.

Another reason for America's high level of alcohol abuse is the church's failure to promote moderate drinking. In the eyes of the Evangelical/Fundamentalist church, we sin whether we drink two ounces of wine or chug a gallon of beer, because once we fall off the purity wagon into the abyss of sin, the degree to which we sin is irrelevant. To them, a person cannot drink moderately and be in good relationship with God. So when many Christians drink, they have no reason to exercise self-control, since they believe they are already in sin.

### **Designed for Alcohol**

It may be that God allows alcohol consumption because He designed humans to ingest it. I can't help but think back to the mulberry tree my parents had while I was growing up. As I approached the tree, I saw mulberries in varying degrees of ripeness. If I ate one that was too light in color, it would be sour and bitter, because it wasn't ripe yet. If I ate one that had reached a solid shade of purple, it would taste just right, because it was ripe. However, if I ate one that had a dark purple color, it would taste like wine, because it was too ripe and had started to ferment.

Few people today experience what I experienced, because they go to the grocery store and pick out the best fruit. If the fruit is too ripe when they attempt to eat it, they throw it away. Throughout history, however, humans haven't had this luxury, because food was scarce. Avoiding starvation has been one of mankind's greatest challenges. So people had to eat whatever fruit was available, not just perfect fruit. By eating fruit that was a little too ripe, they ingested alcohol that resulted from fermentation. A significant percentage of the fruit and fruit juice consumed by humans throughout history has contained alcohol.

God designed us to benefit from a diet that included fermented fruit. How do we know this? We know it from the overwhelming number of studies revealing that moderate drinkers have a lower risk of heart attacks and strokes. I won't bore you with overwhelming evidence, but here are three examples:

- “A National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism study asserts that ‘The totality of evidence on moderate alcohol and CHD (coronary heart disease)

supports a judgment of a cause-effect relationship...there are cardio-protective benefits associated with responsible, moderate alcohol intake.”

- “The Harvard Health Professionals Follow-Up Study of over 44,000 males found moderate alcohol consumption to be associated with a 37% reduction in coronary disease.”
- “A recent study published in the American Heart Association's journal found abstainers' risk of stroke to be twice that of moderate drinkers.” (6)

By these few examples, we see that moderate drinking is the healthiest approach to alcohol consumption. Isn't it amazing how these medical studies perfectly align with the biblical approach to drinking? God knows what's best for us, after all! The man-made religious requirement of total abstinence from alcohol is damaging to our health. So if we are to “love our neighbors as ourselves,” perhaps we should recommend moderate alcohol consumption to our neighbors, not abstinence.

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