



INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

READING JOHN'S GOSPEL

**SESSION 7:
JESUS, CHRISTIANITY, AND ALCOHOL**

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JESUS, CHRISTIANITY, AND ALCOHOL

SESSION 7

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. What were your convictions coming into this sermon? Did the sermon broaden your understanding and strengthen your convictions? Did it change them?
2. Why do you think alcohol is such a huge issue in our culture and in our churches? What are similar issues?
3. What do you think of the following quote by Martin Luther?

Wine and women bring many a man to misery and make a fool of him. Shall we, therefore, kill all the women and pour out all the wine?

Again, gold and silver cause much evil, shall we, therefore, condemn them?

Nay, if we would drive away our one worst enemy, who does us the most harm, we would have to kill ourselves, for we have no greater enemy than our own heart, even as Jeremiah says, "The heart of man is crooked," or, as I take the meaning, "always twisting to one side or the other." (Jeremiah 17:9) And what good would that do us?

4. Why do you think denominations, churches, and individuals make rules about the use of alcohol?

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

Alcohol has enjoyed a varied and colorful history. It has been praised for its effects in calming nerves, loosening inhibitions, delighting the heart, and enriching friendships. It has been accused of destroying families, ruining lives, harming children, and of being the source of societal collapse. Alcohol is enjoyed by the rich and poor and high and low around the world and has been an important part of most civilizations of the world for thousands of years.

Alcohol's history in the church is no less varied and colorful. Historically, church leaders as influential as Martin Luther and John Calvin have praised the gifts of beer and wine as blessings from God. John Calvin required seven barrels of wine per year as part of his compensation while serving in Geneva and one of Martin Luther's most-appreciated qualities of his wife was her skill as a brewer of beer. Yet, Christian leaders and organizations were also on the forefront of the efforts in America to prohibit beer entirely, considering the consumption of alcohol as sin. Jesus' miracle in turning water to wine has been the subject of much debate regarding alcohol and Christianity. We are going to use this opportunity to examine the Scriptures and history on the subject of alcohol. Our goal is simple—to determine what the Bible teaches about alcohol and how we should approach its use today.

STUDY THE SCRIPTURES

Read the Passage:

Genesis 9:18-29

Psalm 104:14-15

Proverbs 20:1

Ecclesiastes 9:7

Matthew 11:18-19

Ephesians 5:18

1 Timothy 5:23

Acts 10:9-48

Galatians 2:11-14

COMMENTARY

A Very Brief History of Alcohol in America

The early English colonists to the New World brought with them a love for beer. The early settlements of Jamestown and Plymouth Colony lamented the lack of an adequate beer supply until 1628, when the ship *Arbella*, brought 10,000 gallons of beer along with the Puritan colonists led by John Winthrop. The colonies eventually brewed their own beer from local ingredients by the late 1620s and by 1634, every community in the colonies was required by law to build a public drinking place “for the receiving, refreshment, and entertainment of travelers and strangers, and to serve publick occasions.”

The early colonists found alcoholic beverages (beer, wine, brandy) too difficult to produce themselves on a large scale and continued to import much of these drinks. The colonists turned to rum as their drink of choice because it was more readily available and less expensive as it did not require the importing goods from across the Atlantic Ocean. In the early 1700s, the average per capita rate of rum consumption in America was almost 4 gallons a year for every man, woman, and child, which amounts to a shot of rum a day for every citizen in the colonies. (Compare this with London’s annual per capita consumption of beer of 75 gallons in the same period). The building of the first church in the town of Charleston of the Carolinas was financed by a tax on rum. During the Revolutionary War and after, many Americans turned to whiskey because it did not depend on imported goods from South America or Europe, which had been interrupted by the war. Whiskey, and its sister bourbon, were made from the easily-grown grains of rye and corn, and was so widespread that they became a form of early currency used in trading for other goods.

The early Americans were not known for their temperance, partly because of the lack of access to good water. In addition to this and contrary to Europeans, Americans separated their eating and drinking. Drinking itself became the focus, removed from the tempering elements of food, family, and the social propriety that accompanied mixed-sex environments. Men consumed most of the alcohol in saloons and taverns, which were often off-limits to women. The further the distance from

populated cities with established churches, the worse the drunkenness. By the early 1800s, the average per-capita consumption of pure alcohol was approximately 7 gallons/year. By the 1830s, the rate was up to 10 gallons/year. This is approximately equal to 6 beers a day at 5% alcohol by volume or 1 bottle of wine per day at 15% alcohol by volume. (Current rates of alcohol consumption in America are just over 2 gallons/year per person, which is just over 1 beer/day for every man, woman, and child in America.) Since men consumed most of the beer, whiskey, rum, and bourbon, this inordinate rate of booze consumption threatened jobs, families, and civil society. Temperance societies, often led by women, and Protestant church movements sprung up with initiatives to curb and abolish drinking. These movements worked in counties and churches to increase public disdain for alcohol. Temperance literature eventually flooded school curriculums throughout the nation. Temperance societies hired scholars to change and rewrite the Bible, removing any reference to alcohol. Temperance preachers taught that any reference to wine in the Bible, including the Eucharist or communion wine, was simply referring to common grape juice.

Eventually, these movements established enough political support to cause the passing of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, which forbade the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol. Medical patients and those who took communion in churches were exempt. Industrial distillation and home brewing were also exempt. The laws and the continued supply of alcohol led to the formation of nightclubs, speakeasies, and increased organized crime. The police commissioner of New York City in 1929 stated that the city was home to around 32,000 drinking places, which was twice the number than before Prohibition. Even two presidents, Harding and Coolidge, drank freely during the Prohibition era. Vineyards began legally selling home-winemaking kits consisting of concentrated grapejuice and the tools and ingredients needed to ferment and produce wine. As a result, Prohibition era per-person wine consumption grew higher than before Prohibition was enacted. Crime, alcohol poisoning, corrupt and incompetent government agents, a need for the tax revenue provided through alcohol sales, and a recognition that America still consumed a great deal of alcohol led to the repealing of the 18th Amendment in 1932.

Public concern regarding alcohol heightened again in the 1970s with the discovery of fetal alcohol syndrome and the increasing deaths of young people suffered along borders of states with different minimum drinking ages. In 1984, the Federal Government created a national law requiring states to establish the minimum age of alcohol possession and purchase to 21. In contrast to the tempering consequences of alcohol abuse, advocates for alcohol began touting the medical benefits of drinking, which were increasingly being understood in light of new research. To this day, American culture enjoys a love-hate relationship with alcohol. The consequences of its abuses are obvious to all, especially to the victims and their families. The benefits are enjoyed by many as well, especially for those whose lives and relationships are enhanced by social drinking and for those who benefit from the medicinal side-effects in the risk reduction to coronary artery disease.

Alcohol and the People of God

The people of God, represented by the nation of Israel and Christians, have always enjoyed alcohol, at least up until the last 200 years, when some Protestant Christians joined the abolitionists in their efforts to heavily curtail alcohol consumption. In an age of gross abuse of alcohol, some Protestant churches and denominations attacked the sins of the culture and urged them to repent of their wickedness, much of which was caused by the carelessness and dissipation of drunkenness. Creating and believing interpretations about biblical references to wine being grape juice and other misinformation, many pastors, reverends, church leaders, and whole denominations taught abstinence as the only righteous option. Today, there are essentially three positions churches and denominations take regarding alcohol:

Prohibition. Those who believe that drinking alcohol is a sin are prohibitionists. In no times is it allowed for those who claim to be Christians.

Abstinence. Those who believe that drinking alcohol is not a sin, but that prudence and godliness require abstaining from drinking alcohol. There is such strong concern for its abuse that it is advised against at all times. Churches that follow this position often require their leadership to avoid drinking alcohol.

Moderation. Moderates believe that alcohol is a gift from God and should be enjoyed as such in moderation, realizing that drunkenness is sinful and that alcohol's abuse can lead to very harmful consequences for all involved.

But, does abuse warrant prohibition or abstinence, a posture not taken in 1800 years of church history in cultures and times that also dealt with drunkenness? Additionally, does prohibition and abstinence create other unintended problems? Before we address these questions, let's first do a mini-theology of alcohol in the Scriptures.

Genesis 9:18-29

In this, the first story of both wine and drunkenness in the Bible, Noah, who had spent over a year locked up with his family and many animals in a boat, needed a drink. The first thing he did, after acknowledging God's deliverance of his family, was plant a vineyard, make wine, and get drunk. After the circumstance he had just endured, which was the complete destruction of all known living things and being quarantined with his family and a bunch of stinking animals, who could blame him? In addition to the drunkenness, he stripped down naked and lay in his tent uncovered. Clearly, Noah's actions were shameful. One of his sons, Ham, made fun of him and joked with his brothers about it. The brothers, Shem and Japheth, resisted the urge to make fun of their dad and covered him discreetly. In regards to wine, this instance shows its ability to affect good judgment, but the only definitive judgment on Noah is in regards to his nakedness, which is in direct contrast to the desire God has for all humans to cover their nakedness since the sin of man and woman in the Garden of Eden (3:1-24).

Psalms 104:14-15

This beautiful song sings of God's greatness, splendor, might, and majesty. Part of the song acknowledges God for the care He shows His creation. Specifically, vv.14-15 tell of God's work to grow food for both man and beast. The Psalmist then makes three statements about God's gifts to humanity. God provides food, which gives strength to a person's heart, which is his passions and will. Food gives people increased determination. God provides oil, which provides humanity with ointments and lotions to moisturize the skin and make it more beautiful. Finally, God provides wine to cause peoples' hearts to be happy and delightful,

as it helps to relieve stress and set aside the toil and bitterness of life. While the text does not allow for drunkenness, it does clearly state that God designed the grapes, the fermentation process, the alcohol produced through fermentation, and the human body to all work together to relieve humankind of its troubles and to make people happy. The word for wine here in the original language is the same word use for wine in Genesis 9 that names the drink Noah used to get drunk. The gift from God can cause drunkenness and therefore cannot be simply grape juice, as is commonly argued. Biblical, God-given wine causes intoxication when used beyond moderation. It is still a gift from God.

Proverbs 20:1

In this passage, the author warns of alcohol's ability to cause people to be disrespectful, scoffing, and boastful bullies. The "strong drink" probably refers to beer, which is a product of fermentation, as is wine. Distillation of alcohol, which is required to produce drinks of alcohol concentration above 15%, is not known to have existed prior to the 8th century, A.D. As any college student in America knows, those who become intoxicated by wine and beer are loud and obnoxious people that often get into fights. Those who consume too much wine or beer are unwise, which literally means they are not skilled in how they approach drinking, but are mere barbarians.

On another note, there are some Christians that allow for the drinking of wine and beer, but believe the Bible prohibits the drinking of distilled spirits such as whiskey, rum, gin, vodka, etc. They use passages that refer to "strong drink" to justify their argument. On the whole, the term "strong drink" is used alongside wine, as in this passage, and there is no biblical distinction between the two in terms of the results when abused. Again, distilled spirits were not known to be used for hundreds of years after both Old and New Testaments were written.

Ecclesiasts 9:7-10, 12:13

The book of Ecclesiastes is about the meaning and purpose of life. The author, King Solomon, tells of all his various pursuits to find meaning on the earth. Solomon pursued wisdom, learning, building great buildings, farms, and cities, sex (over 700 concubines), pleasure through theater and dancing, possessions, work, wealth, wine, and power. In his own words, there was not a single thing he prohibited himself from doing (2:10). Yet, in it all he found nothing but emptiness, frustration, and

sorrow. And yet, throughout the book, Solomon repeats a common statement, the substance of which is found in these four verses. He repeatedly says that he finds meaning and happiness with contentedness in one's work, one's family, one's food and wine—all within the context of fearing God (12:13). Here we see Solomon describe wine as one of the few basic pleasures that all men, rich or poor, powerful or lowly, can enjoy and find contentedness in.

Matthew 11:18-19

This passage is contained in a rebuke Jesus deals out to His critics. Jesus' critics criticized John the Baptist for his abstinence from partying and they said he was demon possessed. Jesus' critics saw Jesus eating and drinking with sinners, and they called him a glutton, drunkard, and friend of sinners. Jesus states clearly that one's wisdom is seen in one's deeds. There are two points to make here. First, Jesus would not have been accused of being a drunk if He had not consumed wine or beer. Jesus drank alcohol and was accused of being a drunk. Second, Jesus' association with drunks and gluttons was a part of his ministry strategy. His witness did not require abstaining from drink. In fact, it required it.

Ephesians 5:18

Written by the apostle Paul, this passage clearly states to avoid drunkenness, because it leads to a wasteful life. The intent can be no clearer. Drunkenness prohibits the sober-minded pursuit of God's purposes, which is the dominant theme of the letter. Rather than living life wastefully, God desires His people to intentionally and diligently engage in His work.

1 Timothy 5:23

In this passage also written by the Apostle Paul, he commands Timothy, a coworker he trained to establish churches, to avoid a water-only diet, but to occasionally drink wine because of his recurring sickness. Wine has an ability to calm the stomach and the drinking of wine provided some protection against water-borne germs and other diseases common in pre-modern times. Contextually, however, we see that Timothy's ailments could have been the cause of anxiety from the stress associated with leading churches and disciplining church leaders who were hiding secret sins. While Paul clearly states drunkenness is wrong in Ephesians, here we see him command Timothy to drink wine for its medicinal and calming qualities.

Acts 10:9-48; Galatians 2:11-14

These two passages tell an important story that churches and Christians would do well to pay attention to. The Jews discriminated against non-Jews for a number of things, not the least of which was the food consumed by non-Jews. God had given a number of food laws to Israel designed to distinguish them from other nations. Upon Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, the barrier between Jews and non-Jews was broken down. This barrier was the set of laws God had given to Israel to make it distinct. With Christ's death and resurrection, there was no distinction—Jew and non-Jew were alike in the eyes of God. It took the Jews a while to get this, including those closest to Jesus. The first passage is a story of God giving Peter a vision intended to help him see that the Gentiles were made by God and were the same in His eyes as the Jews. After three times, Peter still didn't understand the vision until three non-Jews arrived at his house asking for him to go with them. He went and presented the gospel to the non-Jewish family who had sent for Peter under the direction of the Spirit of God. In his sermon to the family, Peter acknowledged that God shows no partiality and the family ended up believing in Jesus Christ.

The second of these passages tells a story where Paul confronted Peter for distinguishing himself from non-Jewish Christians. Peter, under pressure from the Jewish Christians, many of whom still believed it was necessary to hold to various portions of the Jewish law, resorted to his old discriminatory practices at dinnertime. Misunderstood, misapplied, and outdated Jewish food laws were being used to justify discrimination against non-Jewish Christians. Paul was beside himself and openly rebuked Peter for his actions. Peter's actions contradicted the gospel of Jesus Christ and they spread disunity in the churches.

THINK THROUGH THE ISSUES

A central principle in the New Testament is the importance of holding and defending the deposit of Christ's teaching given to the apostles by Jesus Himself. The gospel of Jesus was not to be added to or subtracted from. Standards of righteousness other than those embodied in Jesus Christ and communicated in His teaching were considered prideful and boastful and would lead to divisions and arguments within the churches because of the manufactured standards of right and wrong

DINNER TABLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Some of the following questions and issues may touch on sensitive, delicate, and difficult memories and realities in your life and in the life of your family. Proceed through the questions wisely. You may need to skip a question or two depending on the situation in your family. With this in mind, realize that one of the best ways to educate and develop children and young people is regular, honest, and open communication coupled with biblical teaching about important issues that are everywhere in our culture, be it sex, alcohol, money, or the like.

For those households who do not participate in the drinking of alcohol for reasons of conscience or temptations to abuse, read through these questions beforehand to determine their worthiness for you and your family. As the training of our children is of great importance in regards to their understanding and use of alcohol, you may need to develop more appropriate discussions for your family.

MEAL #1: YOUR UPBRINGING AND ALCOHOL

This first discussion is designed for the parent(s) to do most of the talking in sharing about their upbringing regarding alcohol. Tell your stories using the following questions if you find them helpful.

1. What heritage or traditions did your family provide in regards to alcohol?
2. How was your orientation towards alcohol shaped by your family or church?
3. What do you do different? What would you like to do different?

MEAL #2: DEVELOPING FAMILY CONVICTIONS ABOUT ALCOHOL, PT. 1

Read Psalm 104:14-15

Definition—Moderation: avoiding extremes of behavior or expression

After dinner, discuss these questions.

1. How did eating this food make you feel? Do you agree with the Psalm that it gives you strength?
2. When was the last time you had a glad heart and were truly happy? What happened to you to make you happy? (Explain that God's gift of wine, consumed moderately, makes people feel happy)
3. Discuss the idea of moderation with your family.

MEAL #3: DEVELOPING FAMILY CONVICTIONS ABOUT ALCOHOL, PT. 2

Read Proverbs 20:1 and discuss what happened to Noah because of his drunkenness.

Find a news story or tell a personal story about a situation you observed where drunkenness caused a person to do things that hurt that person and/or others.

Definition--Wisdom: skill in living

1. What do you think it would look like to live skillfully in regards to alcohol?
2. How does the story we read or heard show a lack of wisdom?

MEAL #4: DEVELOPING FAMILY CONVICTIONS ABOUT ALCOHOL, PT. 3

Read Romans 13:1-7

1. Discuss the Federal Law that requires all persons purchasing or possessing alcohol to be 21 years of age and why it's important to follow the law. It is important to note that the law allows for children under the age of 21 to drink in their own homes under the supervision of their parents.
2. How does this law protect the citizens of the United States?
3. Can laws do everything? What should families and churches do to help people develop wisdom in using alcohol?
4. Are there any reasons to ever not follow the law?

FAMILY PRAYERS

SERMON NOTES