

Alcohol and Wisdom

Doy Moyer

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Introduction

God teaches us to think not just in terms of technical do's and don'ts, but in terms of wisdom and discernment (Prov. 2:1-6; Heb. 5:14). Therefore, before engaging in activities, we shouldn't just ask, "Is this specifically allowed or condemned?" Rather we ought to ask, "Does this reflect the wisdom from above or the wisdom of the world?" Even more, ask, "Will this glorify God or self?"

The question I am asking is whether or not we would want to affirm the following: "The wise and good thing to do today is to start drinking alcohol."

For the sake of clarification, here are some particular points that this lesson is not meant to address in detail:

- A. Whether or not Scripture condemns all drinking (not just drunkenness).
- B. Whether or not there are passages that speak of some fermented drinks in a more positive light.
- C. Whether or not Jesus made water into wine that could get people drunk.
- D. Whether issues like gluttony carry the same weight as modern alcohol consumption.
- E. Whether or not someone is going to hell for allowing alcohol to touch the lips at all.

Rather, what we are talking about here is applying wisdom to the issue for today. Let's not get sidetracked, as others are dealing with some of those other questions.

I. Perspective on the Modern Problem.

- A. Wisdom requires an understanding of the times in which we live.
 - 1. Ecc. 7:10 implies that wisdom requires understanding of the present rather than just focusing on the past.
 - 2. 1 Chron. 12:32 speaks of "the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do..."
 - 3. Understanding the age in which we live is vital to our spiritual success.

This is especially so when it concerns particular temptations, sins, and problems that arise from these that the ancient world would not have known. Compare pornography as an example between then and now.

B. The following statistical information comes from the Centers for Disease Control, and helps put in perspective the modern problems associated with alcohol use:

1. More than 16 million people over 18 years old had some form of alcohol use disorder in 2013. In that same year, from ages 12-17, nearly 700,000 had some form of alcohol use disorder. Ages 12-17 – let that sink in.

2. Under the category of drinking “too much,” the CDC says that “excessive alcohol use led to approximately 88,000 deaths” each year in the United States from 2006-2010. Excessive drinking was responsible for 1 in 10 deaths among working-age adults aged 20-64 years, and “most people who drink excessively are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent.” They further list a number of risks associated with drinking. What intrigues me is that they list “some persons who should not drink any alcohol,” and among them include those who will be “participating in other activities requiring skill, coordination, and alertness.”

3. Over 10,000 alcohol-related deaths occurred in automobile accidents in 2013 alone. Within this very hour, at least one or more will die due to alcoholic-related driving. I’ve wondered how many ancient highway deaths were caused by drunk chariot drivers. Really, are the circumstances from then to now across the board, or are there some significant differences that should factor into our decisions about this today? Alcohol misuse problems cost billions of dollars every years. Billions. Many of the problems are due to binge drinking. All it takes is that one time.

4. In 2012, over 3 million deaths globally were attributed to alcohol consumption. Alcohol contributes to over 200 diseases. Globally, alcohol misuse is the fifth leading factor in premature death or disability; among those aged 15-49, it is first.

5. Each year, some 1,800 plus college students die from alcohol-related incidents (including vehicle crashes). Nearly 700,000 students between 18-24 were assaulted by another student who had been drinking. Nearly 100,000 report alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape. About 20 percent of college students meet the criteria for alcohol use disorder. Shall we go on? (See www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics for more).

6. Then, from the NY Times: “According to the U.S. National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, about 70% of American adults always drink at low-risk levels or do not drink at all. (Thirty-five percent of Americans do not consume alcohol.) About 28% of American adults drink at levels that put them at risk for

alcohol dependence and alcohol-related problems.”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/alcoholism/risk-factors.html>)

7. “*Drinking in Adolescence*. About half of under-age Americans have used alcohol. About 2 million people ages 12 - 20 are considered heavy drinkers, and 4.4 million are binge drinkers. Anyone who begins drinking in adolescence is at risk for developing alcoholism. The earlier a person begins drinking, the greater the risk. A survey of over 40,000 adults indicated that among those who began drinking before age 14, nearly half had become alcoholic dependent by the age of 21. In contrast, only 9% of people who began drinking after the age of 21 developed alcoholism. Young people at highest risk for early drinking are those with a history of abuse, family violence, depression, and stressful life events. People with a family history of alcoholism are also more likely to begin drinking before the age of 20 and to become alcoholic. Such adolescent drinkers are also more apt to underestimate the effects of drinking and to make judgment errors, such as going on binges or driving after drinking, than young drinkers without a family history of alcoholism.”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/alcoholism/risk-factors.html>)

8. “Alcoholism statistics from the *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism* show that the age of a person’s first alcoholic drink may determine their likelihood in becoming an alcoholic. It has been found that those who had their first alcoholic drink before they were 15 were much more likely to have a problem with alcohol later in life than those who abstained until a later age. Information from the *World Health Organization* shows that there are an estimated 140 million alcoholics around the world!” (<http://www.alcoholaddiction.info/alcoholism-statistics.htm>)

II. The Need for Sobriety

A. Several passages come to mind:

1. “Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt 24:42).

2. “Therefore be on the alert...” (Acts 20:31)

3. “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Cor 16:13).

4. “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

5. “So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober” (1 Thess 5:6).

B. Should any of this factor into decisions about whether Christians ought to be drinking? Remember, even the CDC recommends that people who require alertness

should not be drinking, so let's ask it this way: what is the wise and discerning choice to make today?

C. The difficulty: On the one hand, there are passages that speak of "wine" in positive terms (Psalm 104:15; Ecc 10:19). On the other hand, the warnings against strong drink, and especially drunkenness, are clear and unequivocal (Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:30-31). Drunkenness will keep one out of the kingdom of heaven (Gal 5:21). Drinking parties and the like are among the lusts of men from which Christians are to refrain (1 Pet 4:1-4). Peter speaks of Christians being different enough in this respect that the world thinks it strange that we don't do what they do. The New Testament emphasis is on the mind that is sober, alert, and able to make godly, sound decisions (cf. 1 Peter 3:13; 4:7; 5:8; 1 Thess 5:6, 8; 2 Tim 4:5), so beware of anything that runs counter to that. The idea should never be that we get as close to the line as possible.

C. In my experience, I have found more and more pushback against the idea of teaching abstinence. The debate today is not so much whether people in biblical times drank something that could have, in excess, gotten them drunk. Rather, the question is over whether modern Christians have God's blessing to, or should, engage in "social drinking." We are not discussing medical usage. We are discussing drinking of alcohol for non-medical and recreational reasons.

III. Issues to Consider

A. Drunkenness is a process, not just a state. At what point do you call a person drunk? One doesn't just drink and drink, unaffected, then suddenly is drunk at the next sip. It takes time for the alcohol to take effect. Further, the point at which one is drunk is person-dependent, and the only way to know when too much has been imbibed is to test it out. While this same problem would have been around in biblical times, with the typical practice of diluting with water, it would have taken a good bit more drinking to reach that tipping point. Whereas the drinking parties back then would have served the purpose of getting drunk, today it is quite possible to get tipsy on far less and in less time than would have been normal then. This is a generalization, but not overly so given the nature of modern alcoholic beverages.

B. The reasons for drinking today are not always identical to ancient times: "You've got to remember [that] for thousands of years, if you lived in a town or a village, the water was pretty undrinkable. ... [I]f you lived in ancient Athens or if you lived in ancient Babylon or Alexandria, you couldn't drink the water, so wine was something that people drank from morning to night. Babies drank it; old people drank it; soldiers drank it; everybody drank wine all the time, and in order for them not to be falling down drunk by 10 in the morning, they mixed it with water and used it to sanitize or purify the water." (Paul Lukacs author of "Inventing Wine: A New

History of One of the World's Most Ancient Pleasures," NPR interview).

C. The alcohol industry of the ancient world was not what it is today either. For example, there is no ancient equivalent to distilled liquors of today. A word study belongs to another lesson, but we know that there are a number of terms all translated by the one word "wine," and these do not all denote the same thing. "Wine" in the Bible incorporates all the way from the grapes in the cluster to the strong drinks. It is a mistake to take the one term from English and make it mean the same today across the board.

D. Alcoholism today is a real and serious problem that is never helped by anyone flaunting a right to drink. If someone is struggling with alcoholism, we must respond with compassion and a desire to help. It is bad enough that this person, even after receiving help, may well be tempted by the mere suggestion. The fact is that alcoholism is a serious, recognized problem today, and it is often attended with other debilitating issues like depression. Even one night of drinking a little much can lead to a lifetime of heartache.

E. If you have never been around a real drinker and witnessed first hand the havoc drinking can bring into a home, then you ought to educate yourself about this problem. What alcoholic today began drinking without thinking that he can handle it? You have to ask if that unnecessary risk of 1) starting down a path that may destroy you, your family, and others, and 2) influencing another that cannot handle it, is worth your public support. No non-drinker becomes a problem drinker until he starts drinking. But now why exactly does someone want to start drinking? Why today, and to what end?

F. Consider, in line with the previous, the importance of not putting stumbling blocks in the path of others for whom Christ died. Promoting something that would cause another to stumble is clearly against the spirit of love in Scripture (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8). I know that there are a number of Christians who are presently struggling with alcohol issues, and some will see how dogmatically the practice is being defended – without showing the differences and offering the clear warnings. Even something like social media is a huge difference between then and now, and the influence that goes out through posts and arguments needs to weigh heavily on our consciences. If I am promoting what will cause others to stumble, I will bear a heavy burden. Do we think about this? Are we thinking about our brothers and sisters who, right now, bear the burden of alcoholism?

G. Does this mean we don't show what Scripture says about it? Of course not. Bring out the passages, but when this is not attended by the warnings and problems that our present world is experiencing with alcohol, we are encouraging a practice that has, does, and will cause many to stumble, some in the most egregious ways.

H. The comparison between drinking alcohol and other “bad habits” just doesn’t work, unless we are actually talking about drugs that significantly alter sobriety and the ability to make sound judgments.

I. Here are some questions we might ask ourselves (what would you add to these?):

1. Is it the right thing to do today?
2. Is it the wise thing to do today?
3. Is it something that will glorify God today? If so, then how?
4. Is it something that will strengthen my family today? If so, then how?
5. Is it something that will yield a proper influence on others today? If so, then how?
6. Is it something that will keep my thinking sharp and focused on the Kingdom? If so, then how?
7. Is it something that will enable my faith to grow stronger? If so, then how?
8. Is it something that I am comfortable doing in the Lord’s presence?
9. Is it something that I am comfortable doing with the Lord present in me?

J. Motivation is a key issue in the wisdom of drinking alcohol. Why do you do it? Why would we want to do it, especially given that there are so many alternatives today that would not put us in a position of potentially compromising far more than we really want to. More questions:

1. Are the reasons for drinking today (mostly) the same as back then?
2. Is the larger impact of drinking alcohol today identical to back then? I’m just not sure we can afford sweep this away with a “just be careful about abusing it” nod. The problems due to drinking today seem to be exponentially multiplied compared to what it might have done back then.

K. I ask these types of questions out of a sense of trying to make the wisest decisions in our modern context – the only context in which we can live. If, back then, people drank wine pretty much all the time, including children, and we aren’t doing that today, then surely people can see right up front that there are notable differences that ought to be considered before making across-the-board assumptions about all alcohol.

Conclusion

Wisdom makes us cautious. It gives us perspective. It helps us to avoid problems that may well come from throwing caution to the wind. When it comes to an issue like

alcohol consumption, the stakes are quite high, and once we start down this path, we may end up where we never dreamed. It won't be because we intended to end that way. It will be because of the deceptive nature of what alcohol can do and has done to millions. It warrants a serious consideration of the problem of alcoholism, the effects it has had on families, and the death toll it has taken over the years. The modern problem is hardly the same as the ancient problem because of the exponential effects in the modern world. Not that they didn't have problems then, but how much more even now? Be wary. Be careful. Be wise.

For my part, I cannot condone, recommend, or be party to helping someone start down a path with an ugly destination that is well documented in today's culture. I have seen where it can lead, and I don't want to go there.