



A Biblical Perspective On Alcohol (& Other Gray Areas)

Clear Rules Versus Contextual Guidelines

We all come from different backgrounds and belief systems, both inside and outside the church. With so much diversity also comes diversity in teachings about how Christians are to handle alcohol and other “gray areas” we find in Scripture. What are the clear rules concerning these things, and what is more contextual? It all gets super confusing and we aren’t sure who to believe or what is right. Here are some helpful guidelines for navigating alcohol and other gray areas found in Scripture.

1 Corinthians 10:31: *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”*

Open Minds and Open Hands

When each of us considers the topic at hand, we all come carrying something - maybe discomfort, painful memories from the past, temptation, social pressures, or pride. Our opinions and burdens have been shaped by our families of origin and our experiences with alcohol in our culture. Often, this leads us to oversimplify our response to alcohol, clinging either to abstinence as the only answer, or claiming “all things in moderation” and never saying no.

Although we come bearing an array of beliefs about what is “right” or “wrong” concerning alcohol, what it really boils down to is that much of the issue depends on the context. Let’s consider what Scripture says about alcohol while asking Jesus for wisdom and discernment, with open hands. With this attitude, we can live between the two extremes of legalism or syncing with culture. Let us handle the issue in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ - for His glory and our good!

Clear Rules

Some passages in Scripture about alcohol warn of its addictive nature and destructive allure, others encourage its use for health purposes or celebration. Jesus himself turned water into wine at a wedding as the first miracle he performed! However, there are a few clear guidelines that the Bible does provide:

- 1. Drunkenness is a sin** - Ephesians 5:18 says, “Do not be drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit.” Drunkenness leads to foolishness and often debauchery, meaning indulgence in sensual pleasures and promiscuity. When a person is drunk, they are no longer sensitive to the Holy Spirit, which is a defining factor of our identity as believers! Drunkenness clouds the fruit of the Spirit within us, hindering our self-control among other godly characteristics, and is mentioned in lists of sins in Galatians 5:21 and 1 Corinthians 6:10. The Bible leaves no room for ambiguity regarding drunkenness.
- 2. Christians should not drink underage** - Christians are called by God to obey the law set in place by the governing authorities, because God Himself is the giver of authority (Romans 13:1-2). Believers should follow the laws given except any that would cause us to go against Scripture and allegiance to Jesus. Scripture makes it clear that followers of Jesus are called to wait until the legal age to partake in alcohol out of respect for our authorities and God Himself.
- 3. Alcohol in and of itself is not sinful** - Scripture reveals that the consumption of alcohol is not sinful in itself (Psalm 104:15, 1 Timothy 5:23, John 2:1-11). However, what can be sinful are many motives behind drinking - rebellion, desire to conform or participate in debauchery, and attempting to escape reality, among others. We must search our hearts for our underlying motivations as we encounter situations with alcohol.

Contextual Guidelines

We now know what is clear regarding what the Bible says about alcohol, but how do we go about making wise decisions in the gray areas?

We find two helpful principles in 1 Corinthians 8-10 where Paul lays out some guidelines for believers who are wrestling with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. Many of the new believers in Corinth were former idol worshippers who had eaten meat sacrificed to idols in their past life. In the culture they lived in, eating this



meat was a very social occasion, taking place in what we might equate to a restaurant or gathering place. However, its consumption was an act of worship to a “god.”

The more established Christians in Corinth argued that it wasn’t a big deal for them to participate in this gathering - they knew there was only one God! The idols are nothing, and so in the minds of these believers, eating the meat was perfectly acceptable. Paul uses this opportunity to deal with a major blind spot in the lives of the Corinthians, and combats their arguments with two major principles:

1. The Stumbling Block Principle

In 1 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Paul points out to the Corinthians that knowledge is their blind spot. They *know* they have the freedom to eat meat from the temple. But they aren’t asking how their freedom is impacting other believers who struggle with former associations and emotional ties to idol worship. By watching these “free” Christians consume what was a personal stumbling block, these believers could become confused or tempted, and ultimately, even return to their old way of life.

This is the stumbling block principle - we must consider our weaker brother or sister in Christ in every situation we encounter and every decision that we make. We are called to love others above our flesh, and to use our freedom to serve our community (Galatians 5:3). Our ability to say “no” and to limit ourselves for the sake of others is a true sign of freedom and maturity in Christ.

This principle teaches us to create safe spaces without the presence and pressures of alcohol in Christ-centered love for our brothers and sisters. A believer who has struggled with alcohol should always be able to attend a Chi Alpha social event or go to a Christian house without being tempted, conflicted or confused. This also means that we don’t drink around people who are underage — it’s not honoring or loving! It only creates a barrier, separating and excluding younger brothers and sisters for the sake of the freedom of those who are of age. Jesus sacrificed His life for them — this is the least that we can sacrifice!

2. Context is Crucial

In 1 Corinthians 10:18-22, Paul forbids the Corinthians from eating meat sacrificed to idols at the pagan temples because to do so would be to participate in the worship of demons. But then in verses 23-30, he brings up a gray area: he says that if they are eating at someone’s house, they can eat the same meat with a clear conscience *unless* the host makes a big deal about it being sacrificed to an idol. Paul is not fickle or contradicting himself — he is emphasizing that the context of consumption matters. The food itself is not the issue. The issue is what it is being associated with.

In our culture, alcohol is a symbol, and can represent different things at different times. Champagne is a symbol of celebration, wine may represent romance or sophistication, and both the red solo cup and the shot glass have become symbols of casting off restraint and even debauchery.

We must ask ourselves what alcohol is symbolizing in a particular context, and if we as followers of Jesus can affirm that symbol. This is where a lifestyle of “all things in moderation” may not be enough — in settings where we can’t affirm what alcohol is representing, we should completely refrain from drinking rather than just limiting our consumption. If we can affirm the symbol, we have Biblical guidelines for walking in wisdom. In an age with social media, we must also consider that when we post photos of alcohol we often lose the ability to present the context, or our choice for moderation. When you post a photo of a drink, no one knows you only had one, and people will likely make assumptions about what you as a Christian are affirming.

Whatever you do...do it for His glory!

Paul concludes his discussion of meat sacrificed to idols with this encouragement: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble...For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (1 Corinthians 10:31-33). In every situation and decision, we must strive to honor the Lord. To immerse ourselves in Christ rather than the surrounding culture. Consider these steps as you think about your relationship with alcohol as a Christian:



1. Be Prayerful: Ask the Lord for wisdom as you consider when it is beneficial for you to abstain for yourself (your past, family history, addictive tendencies, conscience, etc). Support your brothers and sisters in Christ as they consider abstaining, without shaming them for being legalistic. Each person should be prayerful about what it will take to thrive in their relationship with Christ.

2. Be Loving: We must walk in our freedom with love - not doing anything that would cause our weaker brothers or sisters to stumble. Jesus died for your brothers and sisters, so we can sacrifice too, out of love for Him and them! What would be the ripple effect of this decision on those around me? Am I honoring my brothers and sisters in Christ with my choices?

3. Be Honest: Be honest with yourself about your motivations and why you have a desire to drink in a certain situation. Consider: What is alcohol symbolizing at this moment? Can I, as a follower of Jesus, affirm what is being represented? Why do I have a desire to drink or post a picture of my drink in this context?

As we consider the guidelines we find in Scripture and walk in wisdom, may our relationship with alcohol be a testament to the work of Jesus among us. Let's love our brothers and sisters well and live wisely with alcohol for God's glory, other people's good, and our joy!

Relevant Scriptures

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 31-33

Ephesians 5:18-20

Questions for Discussion

- What was your experience with alcohol pre-college, and how has that impacted your view of alcohol? What does your current relationship with alcohol look like?
- Did any of the "clear rules" that we find in Scripture surprise you? How so?
- Which action step is the most difficult for you as you consider what your relationship with alcohol should be moving forward? Why?
- Can you think of any other topics that these principles can be applied to in your life?

