

Scripture's Teaching Regarding Alcohol (4)

The Godly Abstinence From Its Use

And I set before the sons of the house of the Rechabites pots full of wine, and cups, and I said unto them, Drink ye wine. But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us, saying, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye, nor your sons for ever: (Jeremiah 35:5-6)

He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.... It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. (Romans 14:6b, 21)

We have seen that God permits his people to use alcohol, with certain restrictions. That leads to the question: Do we sin if we do not drink wine? We noted that Paul commanded Timothy to drink a little wine (I Timothy 5:23). So does God require each of us to use wine regularly?

The answer is that God never commands us to drink alcohol, except when we drink it in the Lord's Supper.

To explain this answer, we must do two things in this article. First, we must see that God does require us to use wine in the Lord's Supper. Second, we must see that God gives us the freedom to abstain from drinking alcohol in our personal and social life.

Let's deal with the matter of the Lord's Supper first. I will be brief here, because this is not the point which I really mean to stress in this article.

That God requires godly believers to drink wine when partaking of the Lord's Supper is clear from Matthew 26:27-28, Mark 14:23-24, Luke 22:20, and I Corinthians 11:25.

Let me quote Matthew 26:27-28: "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Clearly, Jesus commanded those who partook to drink a cup in which was contained wine. First, he said, "Drink ye." Not to drink was not an option for them. Second, he added the word "all." This word modifies the command, not the prepositional phrase.

In other words, Jesus was not commanding them to drink the whole cup dry; but was commanding each of the disciples in that room to drink. None may refuse.

Today also godly believers who partake of the Lord's Supper must drink wine. Partaking of the Lord's Supper is an act of worship, and we are not free to worship God any other way than that which he commands in his Word. Besides, wine is a fitting picture of the effect of Christ's shed blood on us. Wine contains alcohol, which rejoices the heart. Christ's shed blood rejoices our spiritual heart. Grape juice, lacking alcohol, cannot serve as a picture of this joy.

Perhaps one can think of good reasons why one might not be able to drink the wine of the Lord's Supper, in exact obedience to this command - perhaps because of how the alcohol will interact with medicine which one is taking, for example. I am not ready to condemn such; I do not see that to be contrary to Christ's command.

What would be contrary to Christ's command is if a godly believer refused to drink the wine of the Lord's Supper because he does not like wine itself, because he thinks it wrong ever to drink wine, or because he does not believe that the wine is a picture of Christ's blood shed for him. He must drink the wine, in faith and obedience, in remembrance of Christ.

In our personal and social life, however, God never commands us to drink wine or any alcoholic beverage. This is clear from Jeremiah 35 and Romans 14.

The passage from Romans 14 speaks more of meat, or food, than of drink; but what it says applies also to drink, and particularly to drinking alcohol.

Notice that the passage indicates that some might not drink, because they are not sure God would approve of that act. These are "weak in the faith" (Romans 14:1). This does not mean that they are second rate Christians, or that their faith itself is deficient. Rather, it means that their conscience might accuse them of sin for doing something that is not in itself wrong, because they are not sure God approves of it.

Regarding such people, Paul tells the saints in Rome: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" (Romans 14:1). That is, receive such as a member of the church, and do not dispute and argue regarding his weakness. It must not be our goal to try to convince him he is wrong. Especially it must not be our goal to try to persuade him to drink alcohol, if he is not convinced he ought: "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a

stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Romans 14:13). This is repeated in verse 21, quoted above.

Paul can give this instruction, only because God never requires us to drink alcohol in our personal and social life. If we were required to do so, Paul would have to instruct the Roman saints not to tolerate this "weak faith" on the part of some.

Don't overlook the fact that Romans 14 does speak of two situations in which we might sin by drinking alcohol - two situations other than drunkenness. The first regards one who is not sure God is pleased with his drinking. Because he is not sure God is pleased with him, he sins if he drinks. His sin is not in the drinking itself, but in his not drinking in faith. Verse 23 reads: "And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

The second regards one who can drink to God's glory. Though he might be able to do so, he may not drink if by doing so the brother who is weak in faith sins, by drinking contrary to the testimony of his conscience. So verse 21: "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak."

That God does not command us to drink in our personal and social life is also clear from the interesting scenario recorded in Jeremiah 35. There we read that God commanded Jeremiah to give wine to certain men of the house of Rechab and tell them to drink it. One would expect these men to drink it, then; one should not disobey a prophet of Jehovah, who comes with a command from Jehovah.

But the Rechabites said "We will drink no wine." And God commends them for this (verses 18-19)!

One of their ancestors, Jonadab, had told his sons not to drink wine or build houses, but to live in tents. Certainly it was not a sin for the Jews to build houses, or to enjoy food and wine. But Jonadab, who lived in the northern kingdom during the wicked days of Ahab and his sons, forbade his children to do these things so that they might better show that they did not give themselves over to the wickedness which was so prevalent in their day. Over 200 years later his descendants in the time of Jeremiah still refrained from building houses or drinking wine, to show their heartfelt love for God and his law.

That God commends them for their refusal to drink wine when the prophet had commanded them to drink it indicates that God does not require us to drink wine,

apart from the wine of the Lord's Supper. In fact, God knew they would refuse, and wanted to use their refusal as an object lesson for the rest of the Israelites. The sons of Jonadab obey his law, but the Jews do not obey God's; therefore the Jews would be chastised severely, but the Rechabites would enjoy God's blessing.

What must we conclude from this?

First, we must respect those Christians who have made a decision before God not to drink alcohol in their personal and social life.

Second, we must respect them even more when their reason is to show themselves different from so many in the world and church who abuse alcohol.

And third, when we are of legal drinking age, we must ask ourselves these questions before drinking: am I drinking in the confidence that God is pleased with me? What effect will my drinking have on others who see me? Will others who see me drinking responsibly, be led to drink irresponsibly, or be led to drink against the testimony of their conscience? And will my drinking in any way indicate that I have forgotten to live a distinctively Christian life in the midst of a wicked world?

Selfish people that we are, we don't want to ask such questions. The answers might make us not do something we want to do. But God would have us ask them, answer them honestly, and live accordingly.