

A DANGEROUS THING

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1. **DESTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL.** When used carelessly or ignorantly, this thing can be ruinous and even fatal. Some users (who can predict which?) become addicted to it and misuse it. Their addiction tends to be permanent.
2. **DECEPTIVE PRESENTATION.** This thing often appears harmless and controllable; yet, it can destroy far beyond its apparent size and bounds.
3. **SOCIETY'S COST.** Society spends many resources stopping the spread of the ruin and repairing the ravages caused by this thing.
4. **SCRIPTURE'S CAUTION.** Many Bible texts warn about the dangers of this thing. And in modern society it does more harm than in Bible times.

What should be done about this dangerous thing?

- Forbid its general use; use alternatives?
- Erect safeguards and teach responsible use?

This dangerous thing is FIRE! Both experience and Scriptures (such as, Prov. 6:27 and James 3:5–6) clearly show its danger. Yet, it is a gift from God!

Of course, we should erect safeguards and teach responsibility in using such a gift. But we have no right to prohibit its general use.

(continued)

Now apply the same principles to what the Bible says about wine. The following arguments apply also to “strong drink,” Hebrew *shekar* (translated “beer” in some versions)¹ Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are from the NIV (New International Version).

Wine Was Intoxicating.

There are two main Hebrew words for wine: *tirosh* and *yayin*, both rendered *oinos* in Greek. Wine was called *tirosh* (new wine) from the time that the grapes were first crushed. *Tirosh* immediately began several days (or weeks) of aerobic fermenting. After that the juice was extracted from *tirosh* and sealed up for a much longer period of anaerobic fermenting. At this stage it was called *yayin* (used 141 times).² Making superior wines required much additional attention, such as, regular stirring with their sediments (their “lees,” Isa. 25:6, King James Version). Whether as *tirosh* or *yayin*, wine was certainly alcoholic³ and potentially intoxicating.⁴

They have deserted the LORD
to give themselves to prostitution,
to old wine [*yayin*] and new [*tirosh*]
which take away the understanding of
my people. (Hos. 4:10b–12a)

Neither do men pour new wine [*oinon*
neon] into old wineskins. If they do,

the skins will burst....No, they pour
new wine into new wineskins, and
both are preserved. (Matt. 9:17)

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads
to debauchery. Instead, be filled
with the Spirit. (Eph. 5:18)

The Bible Warns about Wine.

The dangers of wine are exceedingly obvious. Many commentators cite the following:⁵

Wine [*yayin*] is a mocker and beer
[*shekar*] a brawler;
whoever is led astray by them is not
wise. (Prov. 20:1; cf. Hab. 2:5)

Do not join those who drink too much
wine [*yayin*]
or gorge themselves on meat,
for drunkards and gluttons become
poor,

and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
(Prov. 23:20–21; cf. 21:17)

Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises? Who has
bloodshot eyes?
Those who linger over wine [*yayin*],
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine
[*mimsak*]....
(Prov. 23:29–30; see 31–35)

We must not minimize the dangers of wine. These dangers are even greater in modern Western culture. In the USA one adult in ten becomes a problem drinker.⁶ (1) Alcohol is often a “gateway” drug, leading to even worse drugs. (2) Even a relatively small amount of alcohol can impair judgment. There are many more “social” drinkers than “heavy” drinkers who drive dangerously. (3) Compared to Bible times, many drinks now have a higher alcoholic content, and thus a quicker effect.

Yet, Wine Is a Gift from God.

It is not honest to deny or overlook the fact that wine is a gift from God. Consider, for example, the following facts.

1. Wine is called a gift, along with oil and bread.

He makes grass grow for the cattle,
and plants for man to cultivate—
bringing forth food from the earth:
wine [*yayin*] that gladdens the heart
of man,

oil to make his face shine,
and bread that sustains his heart.
(Ps. 104:14–15; cf. Zech. 10:7).

2. Wine was part of a normal diet (Gen. 14:18; Judges 19:19; 1 Sam. 16:20): “Eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart” (Eccl. 9:7). The very fact that wine was prohibited in certain cases (to Nazarites, Num. 6:2–4; to priests on duty, Lev. 10:9) implies that in most cases it was permitted. It was expected that church elders and deacons would drink but not get drunk: “not given to drunkenness” (1 Tim. 3:3), “not indulging in much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8).
3. Wine was a symbol of prosperity from God (Gen. 49:11; 1 Chron. 12:40) and of spiritual blessing (Prov. 9:2; Isa. 55:1–2).
4. God required Israelites to offer Him a “drink offering” of wine along with many of their meat sacrifices (Exod. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5).
5. He also directed them to drink wine as part of worship.

Exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine [*yayin*] or other fermented drink [*shekar*]... Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice. (Deut. 14:25–26)

6. In fact, wine is repeatedly a symbol of the joy in the coming glorious kingdom of God (Isa. 25:6; 55:1–2; Zech. 9:17).⁷ This explains why Jesus made a large quantity of excellent wine for His initial sign at the wedding in Cana (John 2). He is truly the Messiah who will bring that joy.
7. Jesus did not give a personal example of abstinence but of drinking.

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say [mistakenly, of course], “He has a demon.” The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say [also mistakenly in part], “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.” (Luke 7:33–34)

What Should Govern Our Use or Non-Use of Wine?

Often the Bible warns about the overuse of wine. Therefore, a believer should not drink enough to get drunk. Yet, wine is never clearly prohibited to all believers. Therefore, its use seems to fit under the “disputable matters” in Romans 14:1—15:7. That passage includes the following guidelines. In them we will sometimes change “eat[ing]” to “drink[ing].”

1. You should not quarrel over opinions about this matter (14:1–4, 10–13). If you abstain from wine, you “must not condemn” the one who drinks. If you drink, you “must not look down on him who does not” (14:3).
2. You should not act contrary to what your faith in the Lord allows you. “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (14:5). “The man who has doubts is condemned if he [drinks], because his [drinking] is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (14:22–23).
3. Like every other activity, drink only if you can thereby honor the Lord and give Him thanks (14:6–9). “He who [drinks, drinks] to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God” (14:6).
4. Do not drink if that would severely hurt your Christian brother (14:13b—15:3). “Do not by your [drinking] destroy your brother for whom Christ died....It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (14:15, 21).

In some Christian circles in the USA, tradition is strongly opposed to drinking wine. The situation is similar to that when the “blue laws” prevailed. Civil authorities, backing up religious leaders who considered Sunday “the sabbath,” prohibited most activities on that day. Those who condemned Jesus for drinking reasoned the same way. Therefore, unless you drink only in private, they will condemn you too.

NOTES

¹ The noun *shekar* was from the root “to become drunk.” The noun at first included wine but was later restricted to non-grape products (Isa. 5:11, Prov. 20:1; 1 Sam. 1:15).

² Notice the lapse of time implied in Micah 6:15c: “You will crush grapes but not drink the wine.”

³ As generally used, wine was probably 7% to 10% alcohol. Distillation, a process not invented until centuries after the Bible was complete, can make it more potent.

⁴ The intoxicating properties of *yayin* are mentioned at least twenty times. A synonym used only in Proverbs 23:30 was *mimsak*, made more potent by the addition of spices. Another synonym (*shemarim*), used only in Isaiah 25:6, refers to the most aged wines.

⁵ Besides the verses quoted, they show that the overuse of wine can cause shame (Gen. 9:20–23; 19:30–38), inflame (Isa. 5:11, 22), confuse (Isa. 28:1, 7; 1 Tim. 3:8), and typify the lost (1 Peter 4:3; Gal. 5:21).

⁶ It has been estimated that 80% of prison inmates have serious problems with alcohol or other drugs.

⁷ It could also symbolize the LORD’s wrath (Jer. 25:15), Babylon’s judgment (Jer. 51:7), disaster (Ps. 60:3), violence (Prov. 4:17), desire (Song 1:2; 4:10), and Babylon’s evil influence (Rev. 17:2).