

Sobriety (The Bible & *Wine*) by Tony Mauck

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary defines sober, "marked by self-control; of sound moral judgment. Sober Christians deny themselves worldly pleasures (Titus 2:12). This allows them to be always alert, able to guard against Satan's attacks (1 Peter 5:8) and ready to receive the revelation of Christ (1 Peter 1:13)" (p. 1188).

The word sober appears roughly a dozen times in Scripture and the words soberly and sobriety a few additional times. The KJV has "soberly" in Romans 12:3 while the NASB has "sound judgment" ("sober judgment" ESV) and "sensibly" in Titus 2:12 ("self-controlled" ESV).

The main text for our consideration on this subject is 1 Thessalonian 5:1-11. Sobriety is often placed in contrast against drunkenness and rightfully so. When one comes under the influence of alcohol, judgment is impaired. The ability to make wise choices is diminished. One loses control and cannot calculate, reason and weigh to the mind's full capability. People often do things while inebriated that they would be hesitant to do if they were alert and sober. Inhibitions are often cast aside and dangerous behavior often results – if not that which produces physical harm, certainly the even greater issue of spiritual harm.

But sobriety is more than just freedom from intoxication. Sobriety points to spiritual awareness. When drunken, obviously, little thought is given to the soul or the spiritual realm around us – eternal destiny of heaven or hell, the presence of God, the activity of the heavenly hosts, the devil, the great spiritual warfare unfolding (because one is presently losing in that battle! See Ephesians 6:11-18). I would be amused if it were not so tragic – the public service announcement designed to minimize the damages caused by drinking alcohol, "Think when you drink." That's just it. When you are drinking, the ability to think is diminished. But even if you have not come under the influence of alcohol, you still might not be sober. People often live as if the spiritual realm doesn't exist. At the very least, they give precious little attention to the greater realities of our existence – how we relate to that spirit realm. The Christian lives in constant awareness of these greater realities.

Sobriety causes a person to consider daily one's relationship to God and how one is instructed to think and live before Him. So, to be sober is more than just refraining from alcohol but possessing an ongoing spiritual awareness. One's intoxication preventing sobriety could reach well beyond alcoholic beverages to a more general intoxication with this world and its pleasures or a hedonistic lifestyle.

But certainly the imbibing of alcoholic beverages militates against sobriety and that is the primary focus of this study. How much alcohol must be consumed to be in a state of non-sobriety? Obviously, the biblical warnings about drinking in relation to sobriety should cause us to carefully consider our involvement in such things, but further, the potency of many of today's alcoholic beverages should likewise be considered.

	Beer	ALCOHOL CONTENT: 4% to 8%	1st Century...
	Wine	ALCOHOL CONTENT: 8 to 14%	"strong drink" ALCOHOL CONTENT: 5 to 10% (perfect conditions) Common table beverage (cut): ALCOHOL CONTENT: Zero to Trace
	Fortified	ALCOHOL CONTENT: 17 to 22%	
			Spirits – Bourbon, Brandy, Gin, Rum, Tequila, Whiskey, Vodka ALCOHOL CONTENT: 35 to 80%

It would be amusing if it wasn't so sad. The Dos Equis commercial ends with the slogan, "Stay thirsty, my friends." Indeed, you will! Compare John 4:13,14. Consumption of alcohol, whatever pleasure it affords (?), will only provide a temporary sensation with the potential of far more devastating affects if one makes horrible decisions and/or becomes controlled by the substance. One rapidly growing health consequence of drinking is cirrhosis of the liver, and now more women are being affected than ever before.

Honest students of Scripture do not deny that drunkenness is a sin. What do we learn about drunkenness from each of the texts below:

Luke 21:34—

Romans 13:11-14—

1 Corinthians 6:9-11—

Galatians 5:19-21—

But what about participation in the practices leading to drunkenness? At what point has one transgressed and crossed the line, committing sin? See 1 Thessalonians 5:21,22.

Because of the very potent nature of many of today's drinks, sobriety is quickly forfeited. If you believe the Bible justifies drinking in moderation (and obviously a very limited amount), it becomes increasingly difficult to exercise control as one drinks and impairment begins. The possibility of peril is introduced the moment one begins to consume. The big difficulty one face here: At what point am I no longer sober and I am in violation of the Scripture? And another big question is, why am I drinking?

Throughout this study, we will attempt to uncover the answers to these questions:

Is the consumption of just 6 oz. of today's beer or wine a violation of God's will/a sin?

Should possible involvement be tempered by the circumstances of consumption and the obligations we have in the area of influence? Even if it could be argued that a beverage of minimal alcoholic content is not automatically a violation, what about the believer's role as an example and "light" in this world?

The Use of “Wine” in the Bible

A variety of Hebrew words are used in the Old Testament to speak of drinks that caused intoxication or simply refer to the product of the grape whether fermented or unfermented. In a Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), several of the words would simply be translated by the very common Greek term *oinos*. The Greek term *oinos* is not inherently bad nor does it necessarily refer to a beverage that contained intoxicating content (e.g. Isaiah 65:8; Jeremiah 40:12; 48:33). This general term simply refers to the product of the grape. Depending on a given context in Scripture, *oinos* can be spoken of positively or negatively. If the beverage contained stronger alcoholic content (and always when associated with “strong drink”) and was consumed for the purpose of intoxication, it is viewed negatively. If it is merely the fruit product or the common beverage consumed by all and it was indicative of God’s blessing of the land, then the Scripture speaks positively (see Deuteronomy 28:1,7,12,38-42 and Habakkuk 3:17,18).

Wine Spoken Of Positively:

A creation of the Lord that cheers the heart: Genesis 27:28; Judges 9:13 & Psalm 104:14,15

Hosea 2:8,9

Joel 2:19,24; 3:18 (cf. Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 31:12; Joel 1:10 and Haggai 1:11)

Amos 9:13-15

Zechariah 9:15,17; 10:7 (not due to intoxicating content but because it would be an indication of God’s blessing and associated prosperity; notice that the *grain* or *corn* makes cheerful too)

God mercifully offers wine and milk to Israel, Isaiah 55:1-3.

Wine was even combined with milk, Song of Solomon 5:1.

Wine Spoken of Negatively:

Isaiah 5:11; 28:1

Jeremiah 23:9; 51:7

Hosea 4:11

Joel 1:5; 3:1-3

Amos 2:12; 6:4-6

Micah 2:11

Habakkuk 2:4,5

Examples of Wine Drinking in the Old Testament:

Noah gets drunk with wine, Genesis 9:20-24.

Melchizedek brought out bread and wine for Abraham, Genesis 14:18.

Jesse sent a jug of wine to David, 1 Samuel 16:20.

The Rechabites refused to drink wine keeping the teaching of Jonadab, Jeremiah 35:1-14.

Daniel does not drink wine for 3 weeks, Daniel 10:1-3.

Wine & Strong Drink combined:

The need for God to add “strong drink” is for the Israelites not to abuse the intent of His laws. “The Lord said we couldn’t get drunk on wine... He never said anything about beer!!” “Shekar” in Hebrew meant every kind of drink designed to intoxicate whether made from grains, date-palms, figs or the juice of apples. Beer, fermented grain or bread, was a more common drink in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Alcoholic content of beers in ancient times was only 2 to 3%, was often mixed with dates, honey or spices, sometimes diluted with water and both parents and children drank them.

Numbers 6:3 & 28:7

Deuteronomy 29:4-6

Judges 13:4,7

1 Samuel 1:15

Isaiah 5:22; 28:7; 56:10-12

Isaiah 28:7

Isaiah 56:10-12

Luke 1:15

Wine in the Proverbs:

Proverbs 3:5-10 (see “shakar” observation below, vs. 10, “yayin” yes; “shakar” no).

Proverbs 4:7 (a reference to violence, not literal drinking)

Proverbs 9:2

Proverbs 20:1 (“shakar”/ “strong drink” is NEVER used positively as a blessing from God)

Proverbs 21:17

Proverbs 23:29-33

Proverbs 31:4-7 “Give strong drink” ...not an approved command or even inspired advice. It is more like “leave strong drink to those who use it,” cf. Revelation 22:11 & Matthew 23:32; Ezekiel 3:27.

Practices of Drinking “Wine” in Ancient Times

I must affirm again that all references to “wine” in the Bible do not refer to a drink which intoxicates. For example, the Hebrew *asis*, a reference to sweet or new wine, is the newly expressed juice of grapes or other fruits. In Song of Solomon 8:2, it is juice of the pomegranate. The mountains dripping with “sweet wine” cannot be an intoxicating substance (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18). Thus, you cannot just read the word “wine” in the Bible and immediately draw comparisons to modern beverages in the classification of “wine.” The whole culture surrounding “wine” was different in biblical times. Beverages from fruit/wine were obviously consumed with varying degrees of fermentation. And as a side note, the word “drunken” does not always refer to intoxication. On occasion, it simply means to drink to the full or imbibe deeply (cf. Song of Solomon 5:1; 1 Corinthians 11:21,22).

In **The Bible, The Saint & The Liquor Industry**, Jim McGuiggan contends that because the ancients could only produce a naturally fermented wine with the alcoholic strength of 11% per volume, they would often “fortify” their drinks with various drugs (p. 41). To keep wine from spoiling, they could subject it to heat, cold, filtering and other techniques. A common practice was to boil the wine, and this explains the mixing of water with wine. Boiling wine caused it to thicken since it reduced the water content. Alcohol content would largely or completely be removed because it evaporates at a lower temperature than water. The sugar concentration would then be increased by volume so the wine would be sweeter. A higher sugar content hindered fermentation. Thus, by boiling, they made wine sweet and prevented decay. They added water in differing ratios to render it free-flowing and more drinkable. They could still use the boiled product to make mixed wines if they sought a certain effect.

So, “wine” does not automatically imply fermentation. Aristotle spoke of “sweet wine” that “was wine in name, but not in effect.” **Of course, intoxicating content depended upon the desires of the one producing and consuming it.** But it is very important to know that a common practice in biblical times was to prevent fermentation and that “wine” in Scripture did not always mean an intoxicating drink.

No biblical evidence exists that suggest that God approved of drinking wine in an alcohol-laden state. Where is that passage? Constant warnings about intoxication are given. No text referencing “strong drink” promotes its consumption. And remember, whatever constituted “strong drink” is an equivalent to modern-day beers and wines but not even approaching the strength of some of today’s wines.

While it might have been difficult to keep all fermentation out of the common table wine (though I would argue that Christians were very careful in this regard, cf. 1 Timothy 5:23), we are still not talking about the same drink that we would walk into a modern grocery store and purchase.

New Testament Texts Regarding “Wine” & Drinking

Just like *yayin*, *tirosh* & *asis* in the Hebrew, *oinos* in the Greek had a wide range of meaning in terms of the beverages to which it refers. Of *yayin*, Professor of Greek E. Nott claims, “*Yayin* is a generic term, and when not restricted in its meaning by some word or circumstance, comprehends vinuous beverage of any sort, however produced. It is, however, as we have seen, often restricted in the fruit of the vine in its natural and unintoxicating state” (quoted by William Patton in **Bible Wines**, p. 56). Isaiah 16:10 and Jeremiah 40:10,12; 48:33 are further examples of the generic use of *yayin*. *Yayin* & *tirosh* are used negatively together in Hosea 4:11. Again, any product of the grape qualified to be so called. Therefore, contextual clues weigh heavily into the nature of the substance under consideration. Was it the customary table beverage of zero alcoholic content or perhaps a negligible amount? Was it a beverage allowed to ferment, strengthen in alcoholic content and then imbibed with the intention of intoxicating one’s self?

John 2:1-11

If Jesus turned water into intoxicating wine, does not a moral difficulty follow? How could He not be promoting sin at an occasion like this (cf. Habakkuk 2:15)? The implication is that the crowd had already “drunk freely” (vs. 10) or had become satiated with the best wine available, but Jesus offered something that tasted even better and they could recognize the quality of the product. This was Creator-issue wine! The emphasis of the text is upon its taste. No evidence in the text suggests a drunken scene.

The point here is the “sign” Jesus performed (cf. 4:46).

Romans 14:16,17,21

The point here is the sacrifice of liberty for the sake of a brother’s conscience. Obviously, whatever beverage is here referenced is approved. But again, nothing contextually would suggest something intoxicating. The “meat” or “do anything” does not refer to anything immoral of any kind. You cannot just assume that the “wine” is an intoxicating drink and then argue that Paul urges one to forfeit our rights in regard to drinking this beverage.

Ephesians 5:18

In this text, on the other hand, the end result of this pursuit is dissipation (*asotia* – translated “riot” in Titus 1:6 and 1 Peter 4:4) and is set in direct opposition to “be filled with the Spirit.” The two courses are diametrically opposed or set in contrast to one another. The context clearly indicates an *oinos* designed to intoxicate.

1 Timothy 5:20-25

The particulars of the context are very important:

- 1) Paul is going to encourage Timothy to do something which he has not done prior.
- 2) The recommendation, perhaps suggested by Luke “the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14), is conspicuously inserted in a context where Paul is addressing the practice of sin. 5 references to sin –sin, sinning, sin, sins, sins – are found in these 6 verses. And verse 25 mentions behavior that is “otherwise” set in contrast to “good deeds.”
- 3) Contextually, it seems to indicate that Paul is encouraging Timothy in a very moderate use (“a little wine”) of a beverage that he would not normally consume (because of his desire to be righteous and flee from sin) for his stomach & frequent ailments.
- 4) Timothy would be aware of the nature of the beverage being recommended for medicinal purposes.

1 Peter 4:3-5

More than drunkenness, this passage condemns the occasion of drinking – carousals and drinking parties. Anyone who has ever been a part of a party where there is a keg or two or three knows that inevitably drunkenness and lewd behavior result.

Drunkenness is *oinophlugia* or excess of wine (the only time this word is used in the NT). The rioting or carousals is *komos* and is also found in **Romans 13:13**. The drinking parties or banquetings is *potos*, a derivative of *pino* meaning to imbibe or drink.

When the excess of something is condemned, that does not argue for the approval of that thing in moderation necessarily. Consider...

Ecclesiastes 7:17 -- Is a little “wickedness” approved?

1 Timothy 3:8 – Is a little “wine” encouraged or how about a little dabbling in “sordid gain” or “filthy lucre” (KJV)? McGuiggan asks, “Can we not urge a man to avoid drunkenness without approving moderate drinking?...’Don’t be addicted to wine’ is not an approval of moderate drinking. ‘Don’t be enslaved to sin’ is no approval of moderate sinning. ‘Don’t be a drug addict’ is no approval of the occasional use of heroin. ‘Don’t be greedy of filthy lucre’ doesn’t imply approval of a moderate degree of desire for it. If the wine is taken to be non-intoxicating, we have Paul urging the deacons to temperance in an approved thing” (pp. 126, 127). Some guidelines:

- 1) Am I **certain** that the “wine” in a particular passage is intoxicating?
- 2) Am I **certain** that God is approving of an intoxicating “wine?”
- 3) Am I **certain** that God is approving of what is called “wine” today?
- 4) Am I **certain** that God is approving of its consumption for social pleasure?

Putting Faith Into Practice Regarding “Wine” In The 21st Century

In the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek words translated “wine” can refer to many products of God’s creation that were used to make a drinkable beverage. Depending on the practices, preparers and purposes of the consumer, it could range in alcoholic content from zero to something approaching double digits in percentage. Toward the more inebriating end of the scale, many biblical warnings abound. While one might accuse me of having a “two-wine theory,” I actually have a myriad-wine theory. Wine was consumed in biblical times at every conceivable percentage of alcoholic content (that was possible to achieve without the distilling process). The longer wine was allowed to decay or ferment, depending on the practices involved in removing the must or boiling, biblical wines could range from zero-alcoholic-content to “shekar” (the most inebriating sort of beverage). It is IRRESPONSIBLE to simply say “wine is wine,” and conclude that whatever is classified as “wine” today was exactly what righteous consumers in biblical times drank and we, like they, just need to exercise self-control in our consumption of it.

To derive the correct attitude toward modern consumption of wine, we must take the Biblical information and respond in faith and wisdom (1 Thessalonians 5:21). While not knowing what the practices of the righteous were in regard to their consumption of “wine” (and probably not uniform but likely very careful and conservative), one great problem of modern times with the greater potency alcoholic beverage is that sobriety is challenged quickly and one’s judgment becomes compromised so quickly. You don’t have to “linger long over” as was often the case in Biblical times to forfeit sobriety. Surely, many things God gave for good can be abused through a lack of self-control: 1) Food (1 Corinthians 6:12,13)—excessive partaking constitutes gluttony is sinful; 2) The Tongue (James 3:1-12)—uncontrolled, the tongue will lead us to transgression. But one glaring difference is that neither food nor the tongue moves us toward transgression by their very use. Today’s “wine,” in contrast to some of the practices of wine drinking in the Bible, is a different animal, affecting judgment rapidly.

Blood Alcohol Concentration Estimate: Men

Drinks	Body Weight In Pounds								Influence
	100	120	140	160	180	200	220	240	
1	0.04	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	Possibly
2	0.08	0.06	0.05	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.03	
3	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.05	Impaired
4	0.15	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.07	0.06	
5	0.19	0.16	0.13	0.12	0.11	0.09	0.09	0.09	DUI
6	0.23	0.19	0.16	0.14	0.13	0.11	0.1	0.09	
7	0.26	0.22	0.19	0.16	0.15	0.13	0.12	0.11	
8	0.3	0.25	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.15	0.14	0.13	
9	0.34	0.28	0.24	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.15	0.14	
10	0.38	0.31	0.27	0.23	0.21	0.19	0.17	0.16	
One drink is 1.25 oz. of 80 proof liquor, 12 oz. beer, or 5 oz. of wine									
Subtract .01 for each hour of drinking									

What the Bible sometimes describes as “wine,” is not even called by that name today. We call it “juice” or we may not even have a comparable item. While every beverage consumed by the faithful with meals may not have been completely alcohol-free all the time (this would be a very difficult thing to determine without more information), that does not declare as righteous the consumption of beverages of far greater potency. When the Bible does speak of a comparable beverage, and only on the lower-end of the alcoholic-percentage scale (“yayin” or “oinos” coupled with “shekar”), this is never touted as a good thing.

So, why doesn't God anticipate what “wine” would become and give us more information? Are there any other areas of morality that more specifics might seem to us to be helpful? And what are we to deduce from this perceived lack of information?

1 Timothy 4:12 -- What does “be an example” encourage? What effect does your example in this matter have on others?

2 Timothy 2:22,23 -- What does “flee” encourage? Why use the word “flee?”

What about refraining to partake but being in the presence of those who are partaking in drinking intoxicating beverages? What application might Ephesians 5:1-13 have upon this?

Where exactly should the person of faith draw his or her lines/establish boundaries for conduct in proximity to transgression?

While someone may not have committed a sin if they were to go a little further than my line, why is it unwise to tread so closely to transgression?

If the lines we draw cause us to sacrifice beyond what the Scriptures technically allow, what have we really forfeited or have we actually gained something?

We must not demand compliance with all of our applications which are based on our commitment and our faith toward God, but we should stand on the principles of God's word and explain our safe choices to others. Our lines should be consistent, and we should attempt to do this with every area of instruction in God's law, not just ones that we can accomplish easily. Can you give an example of inconsistency that would affect your influence with others?

What additional arguments would you make about the consumption of alcohol in our time? What about the impact alcohol has on our culture? A person is injured every 2 minutes in alcohol-related car crash (18,000 fatalities in 2006). 73% of college students drink; 25% binge drink (5 or more drinks). The toll on relationships is enormous. Unplanned sexual activity increases. Family finances are likewise affected.

AgriLIFE Extension (Texas A & M System)

“Impairment Begins With The First Drink”

An Alcohol Awareness Fact Sheet

Know The Effects:

Many beer commercials are entertaining. Dancing the twist to open a bottle of beer, dancing with a dog in order to get a beer...

***Alcohol blocks the messages going to the brain and alters a person’s perceptions & emotions, vision, hearing, and coordination.**

***Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant. It affects virtually every organ in the body and chronic use can lead to numerous preventable diseases, including alcoholism.**

***Alcohol lowers inhibitions and impairs judgment which can lead to risky behaviors.**

***Alcohol also hinders coordination, slows reaction time, dulls senses, and blocks memory functions.**

***The severity of a crash increases with alcohol involvement.**

Difficult passages:

Ecclesiastes 10:19 (more concerned about the statement regarding money than wine!):

“Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything” (ESV).

“Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything” (NASB). “...money meets every need” (NRSV)

Deuteronomy 14:26

- 1) Possessing “strong drink” does not mean that they drank it or that it was approved by God for drinking. They may have possessed strong drink, but that did not mean they drank of it themselves. There are many possibilities for what they could have used it for, but it was not for partaking. The reason we know this is because they were commanded to use strong drink in relation to drink offering in Exodus and Leviticus (10:9) and Numbers (28:7), and yet in Dt. 29:6 it is definitively declared that the Israelites had not partaken of bread or wine. Now they used bread for sacrifices, but did not partake of it themselves, just as they had strong drink for sacrifices, but did not partake of it themselves. I think there were also a lot of homemade remedies (sterilization and medicine for example) that strong drink might have been used for around the house. A reason to have it (just like I have Nyquil and Listerine), but that doesn’t mean they were drinking strong drink with God’s blessing.

- 2) Two parts involved in the festival -- the tithe itself, and the feast. A distinction must be made between the two. They could use the strong drink for the offering (tithe), but not to partake of it in the festival, the eating. I think the point of “whatever your heart desires,” is that if you sold 5 oxen back home, you don’t have to go to the place of the Lord’s choosing and buy 5 more oxen. You can sell what you have, and then buy what is available. That is very practical. What if you sold 5 oxen back home, you get to where you are going and they don’t have any more oxen to sell. But they have sheep or they have strong drink. “Fine, you choose. God has no requirement in that.” His only requirement would be that it be something lawful to offer. They couldn’t buy an unclean animal, or even just give the money, they had to buy an approved sacrificial item. Strong drink is an approved sacrificial item. That relates to the sacrifice. This tithe was a collection that was taken up once a year, much like our collection every first day of the week. The eating was “separate and apart from” the tithe. Just as the Lord’s Supper is in our assembling. In their celebratory meal, they could only participate in that in a way that was pleasing to the Lord. In no way, could I ever imagine, getting drunk being a part of that. So to understand the two distinct parts to this tithe/festival, I think is absolutely imperative.
- 3) Why “wine” vs. “strong drink”. Wine is related to grape fermentation and strong drink relates to barley fermentation. The need for God to add “strong drink” is for the Israelites not to abuse the intent of His laws. “The Lord said we couldn’t get drunk on wine... He never said anything about beer!!” Childish reasoning I know, but such was the heart of the Israelites. However, in sacrifice it certainly makes sense to allow for both, as grapes I don’t think, are nearly as abundant a crop to maintain and produce as wheat/barley. Of course the question comes in, “Why would God even allow them to have it, and present it as an offering, if they were prohibited from drinking it? If they couldn’t drink it; why could they even have it?” 1) Because it could be used for other things, including the sanitizing of drinking water, etc. 2) Because it was also messianic in nature – applying to the “blood of the grape” and it’s equivalency in the “blood of Christ.” The sacrificial nature, is what ties the two – NOT the fermentation.
- 4) Strong drink is routinely prohibited except in relation to sacrifices. Strong drink was fine as it related to the tithe/sacrifice, but not for the familial feast afterward..
- 5) Ezra 7:15-22 wine is here used for buying an offering to the Lord