

Should a Christian drink alcohol?

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[0 : 00] Question. Is it okay for a Christian to drink alcohol? I imagine some of you already are thinking, well, I hope so. Otherwise, I'm finding a new church.

But you see, if you've been in Christian circles for any length of time, you'll know that answering that question isn't very easy. It's one of those questions that still causes tensions in churches even today.

Many Christians believe that drinking alcohol does far more harm than good, especially those who have perhaps broken out of a harmful addiction themselves. And many Christians, therefore, think that it's not in keeping with being one of God's people.

After all, we're called to exercise self-control. We're called to live differently to the world. We've just been seeing that in Romans. We're called to abstain from worldly temptations. One of our sister churches at one time had a policy where all their council members had to sign an agreement not to drink any alcohol, even in their private personal lives.

But then you've got others on the other side of the spectrum who argue that, wait, Christians live by grace and not law. So we should enjoy the good things that God gives us, including alcohol. After all, Jesus' first miracle was producing wine for a wedding party.

[1 : 17] And so both sides of the debate have good arguments. And you might be here this morning persuaded one way or the other. You have an opinion on the matter.

And we have differing opinions. And so I thought instead of just waiting for the issue to come up at some lunch and be in an awkward position, when you get invited to join a brother or sister for lunch, it's useful to devote a sermon on the topic.

And that's what I want to do this morning, to just look at this question of, should a Christian drink alcohol? Not least of all, because that's pretty much what Romans 14 is all about. It's actually, it's not about alcohol per se, but it's about any disputable matter that might arise in a family of believers and how we are called to deal with it.

See, the Roman church had its very own disputable matter. It was fighting about this matter at the time that Paul wrote the letter of Romans to them.

Amongst other things, it involved what types of food the Christians in Rome were allowed to eat, as this picture behind me will demonstrate. And so in the pagan world, you see much of the meat you bought at the market, like this, was from animals that had been sacrificed at idle temples.

[2 : 36] And so that obviously caused a problem in the Christian church. So some Christians refrained from eating this meat because you'd never know whether it had been used in a pagan worship ceremony.

And it was probably the Jewish Christians who were convicted about this more than anyone else, because they already had strict dietary laws. They weren't used to eating Gentile meat anyway.

And so they erred on the side of caution and just decided not to eat any meat.

They became vegetarians. It's probably good for their health as well. But they did it for spiritual reasons. While on the other hand, you had Christians, most likely the Gentile Christians, because remember Rome was a mix of Jews and Gentile Christians.

And these Christians had no problem with eating meat because that's what they had always done. And the Bible didn't say that they must stop doing it. So they didn't. But as you can imagine, it was causing tensions within the church between the two groups of people and their differing beliefs in this area of meat eating.

You had the meat eaters thinking that the vegetarians were far too legalistic and didn't understand the gospel. And then you had the vegetarians thinking that the meat eaters were not serious enough about personal holiness.

[3 : 48] And that was causing the tension. So that's why Paul writes this entire chapter. He devotes to just addressing this one issue in the Roman church. The problem, though, for us is that we really don't have that issue today.

I mean, maybe when Michiel was reading that, you were going, you know, what's the point of this for us? What's this got to say to us? You know, we're mostly Gentiles and we mostly get our meat from Pick and Bay or Shoprite or Checkers, not from idle temple worship.

So, you know, is it an issue for us? It doesn't seem so. Should we just disregard this chapter in Scripture and move on to something more applicable? Well, no. You see, every passage, and this is what we've got to remember, no matter what passage we open in Scripture, every passage has been put there by God for us.

Every passage is applicable to us, whether or not we at first think it is. And this chapter teaches us principles of Christian behavior in any disputable matter.

Paul was talking about their particular disputable matter in Rome, but the principles apply to any matter we might have that we disagree about. Any issue that we have problems and disagreements about, and yet the Bible doesn't clearly command one way or the other.

[5 : 01] And there are lots of issues like that in today's church, aren't there? I mean, think about it. How we should treat Sundays. I heard this week of someone who refuses to eat clotted cream on a Sunday because it's gluttony, apparently.

But they'll eat it Monday to Saturday. But not on a Sunday. You know, Christians hold certain views about Sunday, where the shops should be open on Sunday. Is it right for a Christian to go shopping on a Sunday?

Or work on a Sunday, for that matter? Other issues like often those that involve baptism. How should we baptize someone? When should we baptize someone? As a baby or only as an adult? Should we dip them in or should we just sprinkle? Those are disputable matters that continue in the church. What translation of the Bible we should use? Some churches say that we should only use the King James Version.

That's the only one that's been endorsed by God, they say. And so the list goes on. There's tons of disputable matters in the church. And you and I, if we're in church for any length of time, will come across those disputable matters, either within this body or between ourselves and people from another congregation.

[6 : 11] But what I want to do this morning, as I mentioned earlier, is just focus on the particular matter of alcohol. Because I think not only is it quite a big issue in our community, but also I think it's probably the closest issue today in principle to the one in Rome.

And so what can we learn about this issue of alcohol from Romans? Well, the first thing we need to get clear about alcohol before we even get into Romans 14 is that excessive drinking is not appropriate for a child of God.

Now, we've got to get that right. We've got to understand excessive drinking is not appropriate for a Christian. Now, the disputable matter that we're talking about is whether it's okay for Christians to drink in moderation.

We've got to understand that. But the Bible is very clear that it's not okay for Christians to drink in excess. It is not. We see this just one chapter back. Remember Romans 13 last week?

Verse 12, The night is nearly over. The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness.

[7 : 24] All right. Paul specifically mentions drunkenness. Excessive drinking as being something that is not appropriate for the daytime, the new kingdom to come.

And drunkenness doesn't just mean going out into clubs and in public and partying and getting sloshed and then going and running around with no clothes on. That's not just what it's talking about.

Drunkenness is also in your lounge alone when you're at home and you drink too much because it's a comfort. But you know it's more than you should.

You see, we won't do that in heaven. And so we shouldn't do it now. Because as we read in 1 Corinthians 6.9, Paul writes, Listen to this.

You see, all this activity, including being drunk, is not fitting for the kingdom of God.

[8 : 39] And if a person persists in that behavior, they will not inherit the kingdom of God. That is the Bible's clear teaching. And so, if you struggle with alcohol addiction, I understand it's not an easy thing to break out of.

But you need to stop. Whatever that takes. And it might be a hard road and a long road, but you need to take that road. And Jesus died for you and offers you His Holy Spirit to give you the power to break out of that sin.

But you need to want to. And you need to work with Him to do that. It is possible with the power of Jesus to break out of that. But you need to do it. You need to want to. And if you need help with that, please come speak to me.

I know there are people. I know there are people in this congregation who struggle with that. They don't want anybody else to know. But they do struggle with it. You see, the Bible says that's not fitting for a child of God.

Please come speak to me if you do, in confidence. I'd be happy to help you. But now, that might not be your situation. And I hope for the majority of people here, it's not your situation.

[9 : 47] Maybe you don't struggle with excessive drinking. If so, then you still fall into one of the other two categories of people. Either those who don't drink at all, or those who are okay with drinking in moderation.

So, in both cases now, Romans 14 has something to say to you. So, Romans 14 has something to say to everyone here. So, first, for those who don't drink, the instruction we read here is basically, don't judge the person who does.

Don't judge the person who does. Now, there might be many reasons you choose not to drink. One might be that you struggled with alcohol addiction in the past, and so you'd rather be cautious to not go near the stuff, which is great.

And I applaud that, and I encourage you to carry on. It's a hard, but it's an important road. Another reason that you might abstain is just because of moral convictions, or cultural convictions, which I also respect.

However, whatever your reason, be warned that as a sinner, your tendency, writes Paul, your tendency will be to judge those who don't restrain like you do.

[11 : 00] And it's that with anything that we restrain ourselves from. We'll look at the people who don't restrain, and we'll look down our noses at them and judge them. That's what Paul says was happening with the Christians who refused to eat meat in Rome.

We see in verse 3, he says they were judging the ones who did eat meat. They were looking down their noses. And for those people, Paul has these words to say in verse 4, Who are you to judge someone else's servant?

To their own master's servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. This is a very important corrective to those who are tempted to judge others.

Because we've all got this nagging tendency, don't we? Especially as Christians. But I think it's a human tendency to want other people to be like us and to judge those who aren't like us.

And that's actually one of the root causes of problems in our society. But as Christians, we do it even more so without noticing. We put certain disciplines in our life as Christians as we sort of grow in the Christian faith.

[12 : 11] And then we look down on those who don't have the same disciplines as not being as holy as us. You know, it's a tendency we all have. And so, really this message is for all of us. And Paul's basically saying here that your fellow Christian, and we've got to remember this, your fellow Christian is not actually accountable to you.

But they're accountable to God. God is their master, not you. Now, of course, that's assuming that they are Christians. That they are in the Christian community.

That they've put their faith in Christ. And it's assuming that the issue at stake is not one that is forbidden in Scripture. Like drunkenness, for example. If that's an issue, then you must take your brother or sister to task.

You must hold them accountable. Or homosexual activity. If that's the case, it's clearly forbidden in Scripture. And people need to know that. Those aren't disputable matters like the ones we're talking about here.

Those are quite clearly sins. They're against God's will. They're against God's purpose for you. And His design for your life. And if you continue in them, then you are continuing to rebel against God.

[13 : 19] But if it's the case like this, that the thing the other person is doing isn't forbidden in Scripture, then basically it's none of your business. That's what Paul is saying.

It's between them and God. If it's something that isn't forbidden in Scripture, it's none of your business. And so rather than worrying about their relationship with God, concentrate on your own relationship with God.

We're so quick to look at other people and criticize their relationship with God and criticize their walk and forget that there's lots of things we need to do ourselves.

And so rather than focus on another person's walk, focus on your own. Look at verse 10. That's pretty much what Paul is reminding us of. You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written, As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me, every tongue will acknowledge God.

[14 : 21] So then each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. This is teaching of the fact that when Jesus comes back, we will all stand before God.

If you're a Christian, if you've put your trust in Christ, then your judgment has already been taken on the cross. However, you will still stand before God and give an account for your life. You will account for how you've used the time that He gave you on earth and what you did and how you behaved.

And you will give an account to God, not to the person next to you. Okay, so that person that you tend to judge for certain behavior, they're accountable to God, not you. And you're also accountable to God for your behavior.

And so concentrate on your own walk with the Lord. And whatever you've chosen to do, whatever patterns of life you've chosen to adopt, whatever you've chosen to cut out, whatever you've chosen not to do, make sure that you've made that choice to please God and not yourself.

Because that's another warning Paul has in this passage. If you'd just join me from verse 6, Paul says, Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God.

[15 : 32] And whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone. And none of us died for ourselves alone. But if we live, we live for the Lord.

And if we die, we die for the Lord. And so whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life, so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

So in other words, the point here is, if you choose not to drink, that's great. But make sure that you've made that choice for the glory of God, your Master, and not for your own sense of self-righteousness.

Because all too often, you'll have that. People will restrain from certain disputable activity, but they actually do it to make themselves feel more superior, to make themselves feel more holy, more holy than the person next to them.

And that is not the right reason. The right reason is that you do it for the glory of God. And if that's the case, great. But then don't judge the person who drinks for the glory of God.

[16 : 36] Because that is completely possible. Because maybe they host non-Christians to their home and they want to make them feel welcome and comfortable with a glass of wine. And they thank God for their food and drink before they have it, as a witness to the guests that they're hosting.

And so drinking is actually part of their service to God, in moderation, of course. It is entirely possible. And so that's the first corrective to those who don't drink.

It's great. Good. I applaud you. But make sure you're doing it for the right reason. And don't judge the person who does. But then what about those who do drink in moderation? Well, this passage also has something to say to them.

And it might be the most difficult instruction of all. Because basically the instruction for those who do exercise their freedom is to be willing to limit their freedom for the sake of others.

So in verse 14, Paul now, he basically shows his hand about the issue of meat eating in Rome. And he says, I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.

[17 : 47] And so in other words, Paul eats meat. And he's come out with that. I eat meat. Okay? And he quite happily eats all meat. And he admits it. And the reason, he says, is because of Christ Jesus.

You see, in the Old Testament, you had these dietary laws. But Paul understands they have all been fulfilled in Jesus. And therefore, they don't apply to us anymore. And Paul knows, even as an ex-Jew, that he is not accepted through what he eats.

You know, whether he's kosher or halal. God's not impressed with our diet. Okay? And Paul understands that. He doesn't get right with God through what he eats.

And, you know, many people today, unfortunately, still think that's the case. That they're going to impress God by only eating certain things and only having certain dietary laws.

But God's not really that impressed by that. That's not really important. That's not an issue. That was all of those dietary laws in the Old Testament were just to point us to Christ.

[18 : 52] And so Paul knows that he's accepted by God through Jesus alone. And he stands before God with Jesus' good works credited to him through faith.

Not his own good works. His own good works don't come into the picture in his standing before God. Which, by the way, is the core of the gospel message.

And it's the only way that you'll ever be confident of your standing before God. And it's the only way that you can ever have a sure hope for eternity is if you're relying on Jesus and his works, not your own works.

It is key. It is central to everything we believe. And that's freedom. You see, that's how the gospel gives us freedom. From works, from laws, about what to eat or what to wear.

Jesus came to set us free from the burden of the law so that we can serve him in freedom. Jesus didn't come to bring another religion. We've got to understand that.

[19 : 49] He came to abolish religion. He came to give us freedom from religion and its constraints and its laws. And that's why Paul knows that he is free to eat what he wants.

And he says so. Listen, nothing is unclean. No food is unclean. I'm free to eat what I want. Now, you can imagine, okay, as this letter was first read out in the Roman church, you can imagine when it came to this verse.

You can almost see the meat-eating Christians on the one side looking over at their vegetarian brothers going, see, told you. But then no sooner, interestingly, and Paul kind of anticipates that, no sooner does Paul say this than he addresses those smug, meat-eating Christians themselves.

Look what he says. He says, nothing is unclean in itself, but if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person, it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat or what you drink for that matter, you are no longer acting in love.

Do not, by your eating, destroy someone for whom Christ died. In other words, you may feel free to eat meat or drink alcohol or whatever it is, and good for you that you're enjoying that freedom.

[21 : 04] But if that freedom causes your brother or sister who doesn't do that thing to be put into a difficult position where they have to either go against their conscience to join you or they've got to oppose you and upset the relationship, well, then you're not obeying Christ's command to love that person.

And so, in the case of drinking alcohol, let's say that you invite a new Christian around who still believes that they shouldn't drink in service to God, and you know that that's what they believe. It is unloving in that case to offer him some wine and say, oh, you know, it's fine to drink that. Don't be so legalistic. Now, you may be right, theologically, but you are pressuring him to do something that he still believes is displeasing to God.

And if he gives in and does that, then that is displeasing to God because he's going against his conscience. And that's what Paul goes on to say in verse 23 with regard to eating meat.

Have a look. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat because their eating is not from faith and everything that does not come from faith is sin. You see, so the implication in terms of alcohol is this.

[22 : 19] You are free in the gospel to drink alcohol in moderation. But if a brother or sister has not yet made that conclusion for themselves, don't pressurize them.

Let God bring them there in his time. Rather, make it as easy for them to fellowship with you as possible, which means limiting your own freedom for the sake of fellowship.

It means drinking some grape tizer instead, basically. And that's when this debt of love that we owe each other really, that's when the rubber hits the road.

You see, that's when it really comes out. It's whether we're willing to sacrifice for each other. And this is a little thing. I mean, sacrificing a glass of wine is nothing. But it's just a small indication of a

bigger attitude as to whether we're willing to limit our freedoms and make concessions and sacrifice for the sake of fellowship.

Because after all, verse 17, the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

[23 : 30] Verse 19, Therefore, let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.

And this is really the heart of the whole passage. This is what really is the point right here. When it comes to disputable matters, not just drinking, but any issues in the church where people hold different views, but both sides seek to glorify God and neither side is sinning.

And as I said, there are things like this all over the church, how we baptize people, the music we sing at church, whether we use drums or not. You know my stand on that. Use of charismatic gifts is another one.

Tongues and prophecy and its place in today's church. What we wear at church, how we use Sundays, all of those things. In all of these matters, they're disputable matters and the principle that we're being taught here in Romans 14 is striving for peace is more important than being right.

Say that again. Striving for peace is more important than being right. Now don't get me wrong, we must oppose any view that goes against God's word, but where it doesn't, even if you know you're right in the matter, keep it to yourself.

[24 : 58] Verse 22, whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. You know what? I think we, as members of Reach South Africa, really need to hear this.

Because we pride ourselves on being right. Don't we? At our theological college, we boast about having one of the best colleges in the Southern Hemisphere, which we do.

And we pride ourselves at being right about so many theological matters. And we've gone into it and we've determined what is right. We pride ourselves at being right about baptism, which we are, by the way.

No. We pride ourselves about being right about interpreting Scripture and the right way to interpret Scripture and the right way to preach and how to conduct services and the liturgy we should use.

And we pride ourselves so much at being right that we can easily distance ourselves from our Baptist brothers or sisters, can't we? We can easily distance ourselves from our charismatic brothers or sisters.

[26 : 01] We can easily distance ourselves from our Anglican brothers and sisters, many of whom genuinely seek to glorify God even if we don't agree with all their practices. Well, we need this reminder, don't we?

that fellowship and peace with them is more important than being right in these things. And so that's pretty much the point of Romans 14.

And so the question I'll leave with you this morning is next time you come into dispute with another Christian about whatever it is, it might be about drink, it might be about church conduct, it might be with a Christian in this congregation, it might be with a Christian in another congregation, in another denomination.

When you come into dispute and you will, the question is, how are you going to react to it? Are you going to prioritize being right? Or are you going to prioritize the relationship even if that means limiting your own freedom to do that?

Let's pray for God's help. Heavenly Father, we thank you, we worship you, we praise you for the gospel, for sending your son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sins.

[27 : 18] And we thank you for the freedom that he brought, that we're no longer bound to do works, but we're saved completely by the work of Jesus. We can't praise you enough and thank you enough for such an amazing salvation and such an amazing certainty of hope that we're not relying on ourselves, we're relying on what Jesus has already done for us.

Thank you. Lord, you call us in response to that, to love one another and to strive for peace. You call us to be a unified body to do your work on earth.

And so we pray, help us, especially when we come into conflict in disputable matters. Help us to strive for peace. Let nothing get in the way of us being the people that you've called us to be.

and help us to prepare for the day when Jesus will come back. Help us to live appropriately for that day when Jesus comes to establish his kingdom forever.

And be with us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.