

GRAY MATTERS

Part 2

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

- Is it beneficial and constructive?
- Will it control you?
- Is it motivated by love for others?
- Is it producing a clear conscience?
- Will it bring glory to God?
- Will it cause a weak Christian to struggle?
- Is it a good example for others?

1. You can justify drinking...

- Ecclesiastes 9:7; Psalm 104:14-15; John 2:1-11

...but never getting drunk

*- 1 Timothy 5:23; Ephesians 5:18;
1 Corinthians 6:9-10;
Proverbs 20:1, 23:29-35; 1 Peter 5:8*

2. There is an impact on your life

*- Proverbs 23:31-32; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20;
Proverbs 31:4-5; 1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7*

3. There is an impact on the lives of others

*- Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5; Matthew 5:16, 6:33;
Hebrews 12:14; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8:9;
1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 6:14;
Ephesians 5:8; 1 Peter 4:3-6*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
September 15, 2019
Michael W. O'Neill

Gray Matters, Part Two

Rarely does anyone ask if it's wrong to lie, to steal, commit murder or adultery. Most Christians don't need to ask whether or not to pray, read the Bible, and introduce people to Jesus; the Bible is clear about those things and many more. There are *other* things, though, that the Bible is *not* clear about – things that fall into “gray areas.” As Christians, our decisions in the “gray” areas matter – in fact, they make all the difference. So in this sermon series, we're exploring some ways to make decisions when the Bible is silent, and we're looking at a few contemporary issues. The gray areas of our lives are really important. Gray Matters. It matters a lot.

So last week we looked at seven questions to ask ourselves whenever we are making significant decisions that the Bible doesn't speak directly to. These guiding questions come from 1 Corinthians 10, and they are going to come into play with the issue we are going to look at today, so let's review them again real quick:

- Is it beneficial and constructive?
- Will it control you?
- Is it motivated by love for others?
- Is it producing a clear conscience? (yours and the other person's)
- Will it bring glory to God?
- Will it cause a weak Christian to struggle?
(remember the rule: when in doubt, do without)
- Is it a good example for others?

Again, keep these in mind because they are going to significantly help us with a gray matters area that we are going to look at today. So what are we going to look at today?

Today we are going to talk about whether or not a Christian can drink alcohol. Now let's be honest: many of you immediately felt awkward when I said that. Some of us are probably wondering why we are even going to talk about it – why is it even a “deal” to drink? What's the problem? But some of us are at the other end of the conversation – we refuse to drink *any* alcohol, and even feel guilty taking Nyquil (Nazarene whiskey!). Some of us, if we were to be totally honest about it, would have to admit to being pretty legalistic about this issue. I think it's safe to admit that we've got folks worshipping together today in this room who are on all sides of this issue. So let's just all admit how dangerous it is for me to talk about this today! I run an extreme risk of offending one side or the other. And if you think about it, if I

do my job right, I'll probably upset both sides! To some I'll sound too liberal *for* it, or to others I'll sound too legalistic *against* it! So I'm either brave or foolish, I don't know. But I do strongly believe that ***God wants us to live holy lives full of love and light not only in the darkness of this world, but especially in gray areas.*** And if you think about it, doesn't this sound *exactly* like what Paul talked about in the passage we looked at last week?!

Now, you should know that historically, the Church of the Nazarene has been on the side of *avoiding* the use of and the support of alcohol. When the temperance movement was going on in the 1920s and 1930s, we were right there in the thick of it. Up until 40-50 years ago in our history as a denomination we were guilty of being legalistic when it comes to these kinds of issues, (listen to me) that is *not* who we are today; thankfully we recognized our previous legalism and changed our attitudes and approach, and legalism is not our motivation or what drives us about this today. So please, whichever side of this issue you currently practice: do me the honor of listening to *all* of what I share with you today, *then* make your decision. You know my heart; you know that I am not a legalistic person, nor do I ever want to be guilty of that. ***I always do all I can to lead from a place of grace and wisdom.***

I want to strongly encourage and challenge you today, whether you drink or do *not* drink, please *have a reason*. You **MUST** think this issue through and come to conclusions about your practices that are driven by prayer, Scripture, and by going through the seven questions listed above. Is that fair to say?

Now, many of you know that I did not grow up attending church; my family had no practice of church attendance. Many of you also know that drinking and a certain level of other activities were a part of my pre-Christian teenage behavior. Of course, drinking and smoking were not only a moral issue, they were *illegal* for me because I was an under-aged adult. So for a lot of reasons, when I became a Christian at 17, I left those things behind.

Then as an 18-year-old Christian, I was called into youth ministry, so drinking has not been my practice. Still, you could say I do have some relationship with alcohol. Let me quickly explain: First, early on as a youth pastor, I had a teen in my youth group who had been cited for underage drinking and driving, and as part of his sentence he was required to go to AA meetings. He asked if I would go with him, and I agreed. At that meeting, the leader gave them a list of 20 questions¹ to ask about their use of alcohol, and I thought about my life before I was a Christian. Something like a dozen of the questions would have applied to me. Then the leader said, "If you answered 'yes' to three or more questions, you might be alcoholic." I had four times that many yeses! I realized that if God had not intervened in my life, the outcome of my life would have been very, very different.

Many of you also know that I have one brother who is older than me. One day, I was celebrating my birthday in my early twenties with my parents and grandparents, and we had just cut the birthday cake, when my dad received a phone call telling him that my brother was in the trauma center at Emmanuel Hospital in Portland; he

¹ <http://www.aasandiego.org/Questions.pdf>

had been in a motorcycle accident. He was driving home from a party and decided to race a guy in a truck when he crashed. My brother had in his system a blood alcohol level of over .30% - that's more than three times the legal limit of alcohol at the time of the crash, and should have been alcohol poisoning. That ordeal ended up with him in a coma for six weeks with a broken collarbone, arm, ribs, and all the bones in his face broken. The surgeons had to go in through the roof of his mouth to put his face back together, and then wired his jaw shut and had to put in a tracheotomy. He also ended up with gangrene in his lungs. It was weeks before we knew if he would live or die, and he leaned toward death daily. Miraculously, he came out of it, but without a third of his lung and with trauma to his brain that still impairs him.

Besides my brother, I have seven immediate cousins in my family, and six of them had to fight alcoholism and addictions, some successfully.

You also know that for a while I worked for the Oregon State Police. I was involved in drunk driving arrests, as well as providing immediate first aid to victims of drunk driving. I've picked up the pieces of people who were victims of drunk drivers. Then as a pastor I have tried to help countless people who struggle to break free from alcohol addiction, and helped pick up the pieces of their personal lives. I've counseled and even helped *hide* violently abused spouses and children of alcoholics.

You could say I have a personal relationship with the extreme effects of alcohol. I say all that because, *if anyone has a right to be legalistic about this issue, it's me*. But I try to lead with grace and wisdom. So for those of you who drink alcohol, *you had better appreciate that I am not legalistic*. And for those of you who do *not* drink, you'd better appreciate that I am *not* legalistic, and I will not be used to justify legalism.

Okay – are we ready to proceed? Let me start out by stating the obvious...

1. You can justify drinking....

You don't have to work very hard to find places in the Bible that tell you that it is acceptable to drink alcohol. The writer of Ecclesiastes said:

“So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this!” (Ecclesiastes 9:7, nlt)

The writer of Psalm 104 sings his praises to God by saying:

“You cause grass to grow for the livestock and plants for people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth—wine to make them glad, olive oil to soothe their skin, and bread to give them strength.” (Psalm 104:14-15, nlt)

Most of us know that Jesus' first miracle was at the wedding feast in Cana, when he turned water into wine. If you read that story in John 2:1-11, you'll see that there is no way you can come to any other conclusion than this: Jesus had not only turned the water into wine, but that it was highly fermented wine at that.

The Apostle Paul instructed the young pastor Timothy, who seemed to be having stomach problems, so he advised Timothy:

“Don’t drink only water. You ought to drink a little wine for the sake of your stomach because you are sick so often.” (1 Timothy 5:23, nlt)

So the Bible is very, very clear: you can find Scriptures in the Bible that justify the use of alcohol

...but *never getting drunk*

Make no mistake about it; *there is no gray area in the Bible when it comes to getting drunk*: getting “drunk” is a sin. Ephesians says:

“Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18, nlt)

We could just say amen and go home, because if we are truly filled with the Spirit, we’re going to let him lead us in all things. 1 Corinthians 6 (9-10) says that anyone who is a drunkard (among other things) will *never* inherit the Kingdom of God.

Drunkenness, or the overindulgence of alcohol, is *always* seen as a sin the Bible. In fact, over-indulging in *anything* food or drink related is seen as sin. (Drunkenness and gluttony are often paired together in the same passages.) Now, the Bible does not define “drunkenness,” so you’ll have to define what it is for yourself, but I think it’s safe to say whatever the legal limit is, that is the *ceiling* for drunkenness, not the floor. Does that make sense? In every state in the US, legal impairment is .08 blood alcohol content level. That would be around four or five drinks, depending on if you are male or female, how much you weigh, and how empty your stomach is when you are drinking.

Besides drunkenness, alcohol in the Bible is seen as a “foolish” and “deceptive” drink:

“Wine produces mockers; alcohol leads to brawls. Those led astray by drink cannot be wise.” (Proverbs 20:1, nlt)

So drinking in moderation is never openly called a sin in the Bible, but God’s Word clearly warns us about how deceptive alcohol can be. The writer of Proverbs says in chapter 23:

“Who has anguish? Who has sorrow? Who is always fighting? Who is always complaining? Who has unnecessary bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? It is the one who spends long hours in the taverns, trying out new drinks. Don’t gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is, how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down. For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake; it stings like a viper. You will see hallucinations, and you will say crazy things. You will stagger like a sailor tossed at sea, clinging to a swaying mast. And you will say, “They hit me, but I didn’t feel it. I didn’t even know it

when they beat me up. When will I wake up so I can look for another drink?” (Proverbs 23:29-35, nlt)

So not only is getting drunk a sin and extremely unwise, the Bible also warns us that just drinking alcohol can often lead us into other sins. So we've got to be careful with it. The New Testament tells believers to be sober-minded and alert (1 Peter 5:8). Peter uses that word “sober” on purpose. Anything that clouds our minds should be avoided. It's simple really. When you are sober, you think more clearly and are more likely to make smart decisions.

Alcohol can cause us to say and do things we wouldn't normally do. We lose a little bit of our self-control, which can lead us into sin if we aren't careful.²

So far then, we've learned that we can justify drinking alcohol, but we are clearly told not to ever get drunk, and that we should be very careful because drinking alcohol in moderation can lead to unwise decisions and even to sin.

But I'd like to widen our perspective a little bit beyond simply whether or not we justify it. We need to realize...

2. There is an impact on *your life*.

The decisions we make have an impact on our lives in all kinds of ways because we are whole people – body, soul, and spirit. There are no decisions that are *only* spiritual, or *only* physical, or *only* emotional. The decisions we make will have an impact on our *whole* being. Again, spiritually speaking, you can justify drinking, so this decision is ultimately up to you to decide. But let's just make sure you make that decision with enough information. In fact, keep in mind what John Caldwell, a pastor and author, writes this about alcohol: “Most people in the ancient world drank alcohol. The Egyptians and Babylonians were manufacturing beer 3,000 years before Christ. But here's something you need to know. Alcohol use changed radically in AD 700 when Arab chemists discovered how to distill alcohol, which led to the ability to produce highly potent concentrations. Thus the wine and beer produced previous to that was, for the most part, very low in alcoholic content. You could get drunk, but you had to drink a lot to do so.

However, today, if you buy a bottle of whiskey, liquor, or even wine, the natural fermentation is bolstered by the addition of distilled alcohol. New wine in biblical days had very little alcoholic content, and even aged wine had a low amount compared to today's standards. Don't take my word for it. You can easily research it using the Internet.

So-called 'adult beverages' are very much a part of American social life. However, the advertising industry doesn't sell intoxication, but fantasy; it doesn't sell reality, but fiction. Ads for alcoholic beverages tout happiness, wealth, prestige, sophistication, success, maturity, athletic ability, virility, creativity, and sexual

² https://www.alyssajhoward.com/2014/08/28/should-christians-drink-alcohol/?fbclid=IwAR0dSf6pkViiEGYyYP885BeTs9dnLu_75-9VPY117RD-2z4QUXLJ_o6IKs

satisfaction—but these are the very things alcohol abuse destroys. Remember what Proverbs 23:31, 32 says:

“Don’t gaze at the wine, seeing how red it is, how it sparkles in the cup, how smoothly it goes down. For in the end it bites like a poisonous snake; it stings like a viper.”³ (Proverbs 23:31-32, nlt)

Like I said, this isn’t just a spiritual issue. Recently, the most comprehensive global study on the impact of alcohol on our own health was concluded by research that had been funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Keep in mind the Gates Foundation does not have a religious axe to grind; their purpose is purely to determine the deterrents to national and global health and equality, to determine the means to national and global health and equality, and to find ways that solutions can implemented at the local level.⁴

This study is incredibly comprehensive – like nothing before.⁵ I think we’ve all heard that there have been some studies that have said that drinking alcohol in moderation can actually be good for your health. But this newest study found some sobering conclusions (pun intended!). I’d love to go into detail with you about it, but I know that when I begin to rattle off statistics, our eyes glaze over and our brains disconnect. So let me just give you the overall conclusion, and listen carefully: “No amount of alcohol is good for your overall health.”⁶ Believe it or not, this was the headline that CNN and Forbes⁷ magazine reported. (I have all the references to all these reports, findings and conclusions in the manuscript, for those of you who enjoy looking at research. I can’t say that *I* enjoy it, but I do it because it is my responsibility to make sure I’m giving you truthful and accurate information. So don’t take my word for it: look it up yourself.) The conclusion of the study: *alcohol is the leading risk factor for disease and premature death for adult men and women, accounting for nearly one in ten deaths, and nearly three million deaths each year worldwide for all ages.* The results of alcohol use include cancer, cardio-vascular diseases, infectious diseases like tuberculosis, and intentional injury and self-harm, traffic accidents, and unintentional injuries like drowning and fire. So while drinking a glass of wine at night might lower your cholesterol or your risk of heart disease, it actually *increases* the odds of your death by these *other* ways, so any good it causes is actually outweighed by the bad. If you look at the research, it is absolutely startling and shocking, and, like I said, it is sobering. In a day and age

³ <https://christianstandard.com/2012/08/to-drink-or-not-to-drink/>

⁴ gatesfoundation.org

⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31310-2/fulltext?fbclid=IwAR0mQG3HCKtai9fTrOaiiEZlsg7FqJeCeU3_kLIFNzswxRxiUut634FGw64](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31310-2/fulltext?fbclid=IwAR0mQG3HCKtai9fTrOaiiEZlsg7FqJeCeU3_kLIFNzswxRxiUut634FGw64)

⁶ https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/23/health/global-alcohol-study/index.html?fbclid=IwAR3InATn8Nhya6aHARdtG_3zIWMXt6x71RdnIHeDrt7m-09IK1giQnnTsPE

⁷ https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwaltton/2018/09/22/alcohol-is-responsible-for-5-of-all-deaths-globally-study-finds/?utm_source=FBPAGE&utm_medium=social&utm_content=1792037706&utm_campaign=sprinklrForbesMainFB&fbclid=IwAR1YlvzA_Njc29BLKckguZO50GELFZWJknMVo6jSHHH909qPo6159Eu6LtE#4d7fe8306dc8

where we are all trying to live as healthy as we can, we really ought to think seriously about whether or not to drink alcohol. Again – I’m not telling you what you should do – this is a gray matter. You need to think about it and pray about it and ask yourself the seven questions. But you must think it through and come to Spirit-led conclusions, because if nothing else it is a health issue.

The Bible is wise when it tells us:

“Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20, nlt)

We’ll look at that passage in more detail in another sermon, but if nothing else, it says we ought to be as healthy as we can be. Which is also why the Bible tells those in leadership to avoid alcohol in order to be the best leaders they can be. Listen to this advice to leaders about alcohol:

“It is not for kings...to guzzle wine. Rulers should not crave alcohol. For if they drink, they may forget the law and not give justice to the oppressed.” (Proverbs 31:4-5, nlt)

That indicates the purpose of leadership is social justice. Alcohol impairs our ability to help those in need.

The New Testament strictly tells leaders in the church to avoid alcohol because it leads to being drunk (1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7). “But,” you might say, “these are for leaders, not all of us, right?” Well, if you remember, I’ve preached before that *every Christian is a leader, no matter who they are, because leaders are people who influence others and make a difference in the world.* So These Scriptures need to be considered by *every* Christian.

So while we can justify drinking alcohol (but not getting drunk), even *then* there is a negative impact that alcohol can have on our own physical and emotional health, as well as our ability to function at our best at making a difference in this world for Christ.

But finally, and most importantly, for the Christian it’s not about our selves. Ultimately it’s about people around us, and...

3. There is an impact on the *lives of others.*

As Christians, we are to live for the sake of others. God has loved us and saved us. Then he’s given us his Spirit so we can have his selfless, loving perspective in us, so that we can be the hands and feet of Christ – the body of Christ in this world. When it comes to society at large, the Bible is clear over and over again: *you have a responsibility to your society. We have a responsibility to our society.* Justice in society is a concern of every Christian. We are told:

“Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.” (Isaiah 1:17, nlt)

(see also Amos 5; Matthew 5:16, 6:33; Hebrews 12:14)

So we *must* consider how our choices have an impact on the people around us.

First of all, let me say something as close to legalistic as I can get: ladies, if you are pregnant or nursing, *do not drink alcohol at all*. There are countless studies that show that drinking alcohol in any amount while you are pregnant or nursing has a direct impact on the cognitive development of your child.⁸ While *you* can justify drinking, you cannot justify directly stunting the health of your baby, especially when that’s your primary responsibility while the child is in your womb or being breastfed.

Beyond our immediate family, alcohol use and its costs impact the US economy at close to \$225 billion dollars each year.⁹ We are literally costing ourselves money when we drink (even though drinking makes a lot of money for the alcohol manufacturers), and we are causing everyone else to pay for it, too.

Alcohol is directly involved in the majority of domestic violence cases. The use of alcohol by one or both parties in a relationship significantly increases the potential of domestic violence, and while domestic violence is a learned behavior (abusers have been abused or have grown up in abusive homes), alcohol is involved in nearly two thirds of domestic abuse cases in the US.¹⁰ I’m not saying if you drink you will do those things; I’m saying we need to think through how our use of alcohol supports a product and industry that keeps people addicted and oppressed.

By the way: The Church of the Nazarene has always had a heart and eye toward the poor and oppressed. The battle cry of our church since day one has been that of being socially conscious and compassionate, fighting for justice for those who can’t do it themselves. We’ve always believed that holiness is social and Spirit-filled Christians practice social consciousness and justice. So it is out of a heart of compassion that historically we’ve encouraged people to avoid alcohol.

Okay, so let’s return to the passages in 1 Corinthians 8-10 that we talked about last week, and the questions we reviewed at the beginning of our time here this morning. Let me quote Dan Boone, an author, pastor, and university professor, who writes about what was going on in the Corinth at that time: “The Corinthians had grown up in the social world of the gods— Zeus, Aphrodite, Dionysus. Ornate temples were erected for the worship of these gods. Cultic celebrations were commonplace. Animals were sacrificed to the gods, the meat cooked, and the meal served to gathered people. The more sacrificial meat they ate, the more “filled” with

⁸ https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/30/health/alcohol-breast-milk-lower-cognition-peds-study/index.html?fbclid=IwAR2YbyjFyxguK6kaBXh4QKX1YnV9y4rtes6ODWZwwAK_JlH2EcPNcjQkyC8

⁹ Lancet, *ibid*.

¹⁰

https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/factsheets/fs_intimate.pdf

the gods they were. Eating the idol meat was a social event. These events were connected to craft guilds, marriages, and cultural banquets.

But when the gospel of Jesus came to Corinth, the question of eating sacrificial meat was raised. The Jewish story suggested that animal sacrifices were connected in the Old Testament to the worship of the one true God. And the “Spirit-filling” (for Christians) was not the spirit of the gods but the Spirit of the resurrected Jesus. Some said, “It’s OK to eat the meat.” Others said, “This is wrong.”

So what conclusion does the Apostle Paul reach in 1 Corinthians 8—10? He refuses to view the eating of the sacrificed meat as an act of evil, unless the one who does so is a participant in the worship of demons. Paul also says that it is wrong for one with a “weaker conscience” to impose (abstinence) on the one who eats the meat. *The call is to act in the best interest of the other (person)*. This means that the one who recognizes the harm being done by eating sacrificial meat will not eat it, and the one offended by eating the sacrificial meat will not demand abstinence of those who eat with a clear conscience.

Translated to (the issue of drinking alcohol)—those who abstain will not pass judgment on those brothers and sisters who drink while belonging to the family of God. And those who see the harm being done by alcohol may, in love for others, choose to abstain.”¹¹ So if some of you, as a Christian, choose to drink, no one in this church is going to condemn you. (Did everyone hear that?!) At the same time, some of you will decide *not* to drink because of how it will directly affect yourself and others around you. That is your conviction, and that is *also* correct. But our biggest priority is always the *other person*, not our own justifications. That’s why the Apostle Paul said that we are to avoid alcohol altogether if we are going to cause another believer to stumble in their faith or not come to faith. (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8:9) When you realize that one in eight Americans (12.5%) are alcoholics,¹² you’ll understand that we need to be careful to avoid alcohol around other believers who feel it is wrong to drink altogether, as well as around unbelievers. Many Christians feel this way, and the Bible teaches us to honor and respect their view of alcohol by not drinking around them. By the way, if you do not drink, you’re not alone. Across the board, 35% of Americans, religious or not, do not drink.

So please, don’t ever allow alcohol to destroy your Christian witness. (1 Corinthians 5:11, 2 Corinthians 6:14, Ephesians 5:8, 1 Peter 4:3-6) The world is watching. We never want the light of Christ to be clouded simply because we insist on doing what we want, whether we can justify it or not.¹³

¹¹ <http://www.danboone.me/should-christians-drink-alcohol/?fbclid=IwAR2kFqs88ryuFCiz85AuD6felo14QvdDg9ARrwo46bbLGqGwo6zEt2srOJg>

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/08/11/study-one-in-eight-american-adults-are-alcoholics/?noredirect=on>

¹³ https://www.alyssajhoward.com/2014/08/28/should-christians-drink-alcohol/?fbclid=IwAR0dSf6pkViiEGYyYP885BeTs9dnLu_75-9VPY117RD-2z4QUXLJ_o6IKs

If you are trying to decide whether to drink or not, let me give you author John Caldwell's suggestion: "Try a little experiment. Carefully read a city newspaper for the next seven days. Make note of all the stories of tragedy and heartache that somehow involve alcohol. Then, against that backdrop, try to defend its use. A quote often attributed to Abraham Lincoln is, 'Alcohol has many defenders, but no defense.'"¹⁴

So let me conclude (are you still with me or have you checked out?).

Listen: this is a gray matter. And it matters. I'm not going to judge you or condemn you on what you decide. Ultimately, you need to pray, read Scripture, listen to the Holy Spirit and to wise counsel, ask yourself those seven questions, and you need to decide what you believe. But either way: you must be convinced; you *cannot* move forward either way without being convinced. I just pray that today, at least when it comes to this particular area of gray matter, you've changed the question. Rather than asking God, "*Can* I drink?" maybe the better question is, "*Should* I drink?"

Pray

¹⁴ Caldwell, *Ibid*