

1 Timothy 5:23: "Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach"

A favorite verse of many people is Paul's advice to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:23 to "No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." We need to note several things. Timothy obviously doesn't even drink grape juice! (Note: in an earlier letter 1 Tim 3:2-3 Paul had told Timothy an Elder to be abstinent (*nephalion*), and a nonparticipant at drinking places and parties (*me paroinon*). Obviously advise Timothy had carefully followed). Additionally this is only for a 'medical' reason. Most significantly, historical testimonies tell us the ancients advised the use of use of *unfermented wine* for medical purposes. For example, Athenaeus, the Grammarian (A.D. 280), specifically advises one use unfermented "sweet wine" (*glukon oionon*) for stomach disorders. He writes: "Let him take sweet wine, either mixed with water or warmed, especially that kind called protropos, the sweet Lesbian glukus, as being good for the stomach; for sweet wine [oinos] does not make the head heavy." (Athenaeus, *Banquet* 2, 24). This sounds similar to Paul. Athenaeus calls the wine "lesbian" because its alcoholic potency had been removed. Pliny (A. D. 79), a contemporary of Paul and author of the celebrated *Natural History* gives similar recommendations. He advise the use of boiled unfermented wine called *adynamon* for sick persons "for whom it is feared that wine may be harmful." (Pliny, *Natural History* 14,18). Even if it were alcoholic wine Paul was talking about, it would only justify medical uses of alcohol. Paul is not here suggesting moderate drinking.

Be abstinent

The New Testament often admonitions abstinence through the Greek verb *nepho* and the adjective *nephalios* (1 Thess 5:6-8; 1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; 5:8; 2 Tim 4:5; 1 Tim 3:2, 11; Titus 2:2). There is noteworthy unanimity among Greek lexicons on the primary meaning of the verb *nepho* as "to abstain from wine" and of the adjective *nephalios* as "abstinent, without wine." (See, for example, G. W. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961), s. v. "Nepho"; James Donnegan, *A New Greek and English Lexicon*, 1847 edition, s. v. "Nepho"; Thomas S. Green, *A Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament*, 1892 edition, s. v. "Nepho"; E. Robinson, *A Greek and English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, 1850), s. v. "Nepho"; G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1937 edition, s. v. "Nepho"; Hesychius of Alexandria, *Hesychii Alexandri Lexicon*, 1858 edition, s. v. "Nephalios"; Demetrios C. S. Byzantios, *Lexicon Epitomotus Ellenikes Glosses*, 1939 edition, s. v. "Nephalios."). Josephus and Philo, who were contemporaries of Paul and Peter, both tell us the priests, who were not allowed to drink any wine were *nephalioi* and *nephalios*. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3, 12, 2, trans. William Whiston, *Josephus Complete Works* (Grand Rapids, 1974), p. 81 and Philo, *De Specialibus Legibus* 4, 183). The adjective *nephalios* in 1 Timothy 3:2, 11, Titus 2:2 can and should be read as abstinent. And *nepho* in 1 Thess 5:6-8, 1 Peter 1:13, 1 Peter 5:8, should be translated as abstinent or abstaining from wine. Unfortunately, translators soften the meaning of the word and translate it in a more figurative sense as merely "temperate, sober, steady."

While there is no simplistic "Thou shall not" command concerning alcohol, the Bible warns against wine that intoxicates. In addition to the Bibles warnings, there are many reasons for a Christian to avoid alcohol. Up to half of all crime is committed while under the influence of alcohol. There is our influence and example to friends, family and children (you cannot teach what you refuse to practice – its called hypocrisy). Many people are strongly predisposed to alcoholism and one drink may begin a lifetime of struggle and suffering. Finally, in view of Jesus soon return, we should avoid anything that would adversely affect our minds, hearts, bodies and social example.

(Note: This study has used/adapted material from "Wine in the Bible" by S. Bacchiocchi).

A Lifestyle that Honours God

Our bodies are sacred temples for God. Paul said, “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were brought with a price. Therefore honour God with your Body*” (1 Cor 6:19,20). But many modern people and even Christians either neglect the body or worship it. Most people think the body has nothing to do with their spiritual life. They think only the ‘spirit’ or the ‘soul’ is sacred. However, in scripture the body is a good gift from God and there is no life outside of it. There is no soul in us that flies away after death. Life, physical or spiritual, is only in a body (whether current bodies or future resurrected bodies) and we must treat the body in a way that glorifies God. Our whole lifestyle should be one that A) honours God, B) respects others and C) enhances health and reduces potential disease and suffering in the world. The link between mind, spirit and body is very intimate. Each one affects the other for good or for bad. For example:

- A prolonged negative *mental and emotional state* actually has a negative physical effect on the body and its immune system. Doctors are well aware now of disastrous effects *negative stress* has on the body.
- *Sleep* affects our health, our physical alertness, and our moods; this in turn indirectly affects our relationships!
- *Exercise* or lack of it affects almost every function of the body and mind.
- *Diet*. You are what you eat. We can eat for health or we can eat and harm our health (i.e. gluttony, a bad diet with lots of sugar, fat and junk food).
- And of course *Drugs* can physically destroy mind and body. One of the most common is *smoking* which quite literally kills us. *Alcohol* causes more pain, death and suffering than all illegal drugs and should be completely avoided by a disciple of Jesus for moral, spiritual and scriptural reasons (see below).

In addition to these things how we *use* and *present* our bodies affects our social and spiritual relationships.

- We should present ourselves well before others, but we should do so **modestly**. (1 Peter 3:3,4 tells us our “*beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.*”).
- We also should not use our bodies in a violent or intimidating manner.

Scripture and Diet

When God delivered the Israelites from idolatry and slavery in Egypt he also wanted to change their whole lifestyle and even diet. God gave the Israelites food guidelines in Deuteronomy 14:3-21. God told the Israelites to avoid eating certain ‘unclean’ animals. Although God doesn’t spell out the reasons in modern scientific terms as to why we shouldn’t eat these animals, we can observe that many of these animals tend to be predators or scavengers and we know they are more likely to be unhealthy and carry various diseases. Some say this clean/unclean distinction is only for the Jews but in scripture it is around before there was a Jew (see Gen 7:2). In the Bible the animal’s unclean status is inherent and has no link with any ceremonial uncleanness.

[Note: Mark 7:19 is talking about ritually 'unclean' food (i.e. food touched by 'unclean' hands see 7:2-5) not the unclean foods mentioned above. 1 Tim 4:3-5 doesn't approve of all foods per se, only those that are in verses 5 "*sanctified by God's Word* (i.e. Deuteronomy) and prayer"]. The original idea of how God designed us to live is given in Genesis. Here we see that God intended humans to live in harmony with nature as *vegetarians* (Genesis 1:29 see also 3:17-19). Many Christians seek to follow this original optimum design for the body and the environment. Studies show they greatly benefit by living longer (7-8 years) and enjoy better health and well-being.

Wine: An Apparent Contradiction

What about wine or alcohol? The Bible has no simplistic command that says, "You shall not drink alcohol," though some warnings come close (The Bible doesn't say, "Don't take LSD", yet all Christians rightly condemn such drugs). However, the whole voice and direction of the Bible is clearly against intoxicating drink. We can tell this because wine that intoxicates is portrayed negatively in Biblical narratives and is routinely warned against (Lev 10:8-11; Judg 13:3, 4; Prov 31:4, 5; 23:31; 20:1; Hab 2:5; Eph 5:18; 1 Tim 3:2, 3), whereas non-intoxicating wine is portrayed positively (Gen 27:28; 49:10-12; Ps 104:14, 15; Is 55:1; Amos 9:13; John 2:10, 11).

This simultaneous approval and disapproval of 'wine' can seem confusing and contradictory. This problem largely disappears when we realize that the Hebrew and Greek words for wine (*yayin* and *oinos*) can mean *either fermented or unfermented wine*. The ancient writers who were contemporaries with many of the Biblical writers use the words to refer to *both* types of wine. For example in his book *Metereologica*, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) speaks of unfermented grape juice (glukus), saying: "*though called wine [oinos], it has not the effect of wine, for it does not taste like wine and does not intoxicate like ordinary wine.*" Aristotle explicitly tells us unfermented grape juice was called "oinos" or "wine". Other examples can be found in ancient Jewish writings also (The Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament in Greek, often translates the Hebrew word for grape-juice "tirosh" by the Greek word 'oinos' or wine). The problem is not wine but what kind of wine. The Bible speaks against fermented wine, but for unfermented wine. Scripture condemns the use of alcoholic beverages because they distort the perception of reality (Is 28:7; Prov 23:33); they impair the capacity to make moral, responsible decisions (Lev 10:9-11); they weaken moral sensitivities and inhibitions (Gen 9:21; 19:32; Hab 2:15; Is 5:11-12); they cause physical sickness (Prov 23:20-21; Hos 7:5; Is 19:14; Ps 60:3); and they disqualify for civil and religious service (Prov 31:4-5; Lev 10:9-11; 1 Tim 3:2-3; Titus 1:7-8).

Contrary to popular opinion, it was as hard if not harder to preserve fermented wine than unfermented grape juice. To prevent fermented wine from becoming acid, moldy, or foul-smelling, the ancients used many preservatives such as salt, sea-water, liquid or solid pitch, boiled-down must, marble dust, lime, sulphur fumes or crushed iris. In comparison the preservation of grape juice unfermented was a relatively simpler process. Ancient sources inform us of four main ways: (1) by boiling down the juice to a syrup, (2) by separating the fermentable pulp from the juice of the grape by means of filtration, (3) by placing freshly pressed grape juice in sealed jars which were immersed in a pool of cold water, and (4) by fumigating the wine jars with sulphur before sealing them. What follows are some Bible texts that are commonly misused by people to justify moderate drinking (space doesn't allow us to cover others).

Jesus and Wine

Many think Jesus turned water into alcoholic wine at the wedding of Cana. Supposedly "good wine" is that which has a high alcoholic content. *However, ancient authors from Jesus day considered "good wine" to be unfermented wine whose alcoholic potency had been removed by boiling or filtration.* Pliny, for example, says "wines are most beneficial (utilissimum) when all their potency has been removed by the strainer." (Pliny, *Natural History* 23, 24, trans. W. H. S. Jones, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961). Similarly, Plutarch tells us wine is "much more pleasant to drink" when it "neither inflames the brain nor infests the mind or passions" because its strength has been removed through frequent filtering. (Plutarch, *Symposiac* 8, 7). The ancient Jewish Talmud indicates that drinking to the accompaniment of musical instruments on festive occasions such as a wedding was forbidden. (See *Sotah* 48a; also *Mishna Sotah* 9, 11). Some interpret John 2:10 "well drunk" as meaning very intoxicated. But the Greek verb *methusko* is correctly translated "to drink freely" by the RSV of the Bible, without any implication of intoxication.

New Wine in New Wineskins

Christ's statement that "new wine must be put into fresh wineskins" (Luke 5:38; Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22), supposedly indicates Jesus approved use of alcohol. This is a strange interpretation, as Jesus is not even talking about whether one should drink wine or not. Nothing in this passage supports drinking alcohol. It is probable that the wine is non-alcoholic as it is simply not possible for new or old wineskins to withstand the pressure of fermentation! Unfermented grape juice must be put into new wineskins. If new wine was put into old wineskins, remnant material from the pervious wine could start fermentation and develop gas with an enormous pressure that would burst and ruin both the grape juice and the skin. Unfermented must, after it had been filtered or boiled, is 'new wine' which could be safely stored in new wineskins. Luke adds the following to this story "And no one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, 'The old is good'" (Luke 5:39). Some people claim Jesus is commending old wine, which is likely fermented. They miss the whole point. In verses 33-39 Jesus is describing how the 'old' ways of the Pharisees don't like the 'new' work of Jesus. Jesus says not to put new wine into old wineskins, a new patch on an old garment. He then concludes that one who is used to old wine won't want the new. The person preferring the old (fermented wine) is the Pharisee who is resisting Jesus new teachings.

The Last Supper

During Passover time when Jesus instituted the last supper he referred to the wine as the "the fruit of the vine"(Matt 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). The noun "fruit" (*gennema*) emphasizes this 'wine' is that which is in its natural state, just as it is gathered. Fermented wine is not the natural "fruit of the vine" but the unnatural fruit of fermentation and decay. The Jewish historian Josephus, a contemporary of the apostles, explicitly calls the three clusters of grapes freshly squeezed in a cup by Pharaoh's cupbearer as "the fruit of the vine." (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 2, 5, 2). The phrase is clearly used to refer to the sweet, unfermented juice of the grape. We should also note that all fermented products (leaven bread etc) were to be disregarded at Passover time. Numerous ancient Christian groups use unfermented grape juice for the last supper.