

Should We Use Wine at Communion Matthew 26:36-39

We have potential confusion here at Redeemer. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper together we use wine (and we offer grape juice). For some of you that will be perfectly normal, but for others that is totally new and may seem unnecessary or strange at best and wrong at worst. You've never had wine at communion, and you've been taught that drinking alcohol is a sin. Let us attempt to be helpful to clarify this issue.

The best place to start is the Garden of Gethsemane. We hear Jesus in prayer. He is in agony. If there ever was a dark night of the soul, this is it. Jesus has instituted the Last Supper with his disciples in the upper room, walked roughly one mile across the Kidron Valley east of Jerusalem to an olive grove. He told his faithful followers to wait and pray. Jesus has arrived at his anticipated horrific end. His short 33 years on earth will conclude in torment at 3:00pm the next day following hours of torture. He is on the verge of experiencing sorrow, bitterness, torment of soul, unspeakable physical pain, and immeasurable psychological devastation. Humanly, it is too much. Thus Jesus prays,

*"My Father, if it is possible, let **this cup** pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will."*

All that Jesus is about to suffer is represented or symbolized in **the cup**.

We need to explore the cup with three questions:

1. What is it?
2. Why does Jesus drink it?
3. What happened to it?

Answering the first question will take virtually all of the space of this essay.

1. What is the cup?

There are two allusions to Jesus' cup in the NT:

John 18:11 *"Jesus therefore said to Peter, 'Put the sword into the sheathe; **the cup** which the Father has given me, shall I not drink it?'"*

Matthew 20:22 *"Are you able to drink **the cup** I am about to drink?"*

As I just said, all that Jesus suffered is represented or symbolized by the cup.

What is in the cup that makes it so terrifying?

We find two different cups in the OT:

1. the cup of blessing

-Ps. 23:5 *"my **cup** overflows"*

-Ps.16:5 *"the Lord is my portion and my **cup**."*

-Ps.116:13 *"I shall lift up the **cup** of salvation, and call on the name of the Lord."*

This cup is a metaphor for God's provision. We drink in God's goodness.

Ps.36:8: *"they drink their fill of the abundance of thy house, and thou dost give them to drink of the river of thy delights."*

2. the cup of cursing (a much more prominent use of cup in the OT)

Ps.11:6 *"Upon the wicked He will rain coals; fire and brimstone shall be the portion of their cup."*

Job 21:20 *“And let him drink of the wrath of the Almighty.”*

Obadiah 16 *“all the nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow, and become as if they never existed.”*

Jeremiah. 25:15 (17,28) *“For thus the Lord, the God of Israel says to me, ‘Take this cup of the wine of wrath from my hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it.’”*

Ps.75:8 *“For a cup is in the hand of the Lord, and the wine foams; it is well mixed, and he pours out of this. Surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs.”*

You notice in these allusions that wine is in the cup. It is a metaphor of the Lord’s anger or fury. Why wine and not oil or water or a vegetable juice or honey?

Wine is a perfect metaphor because it represents both God’s blessing and wrath: Wine can be either sweet or bitter; it can cheer or mock; it can be smooth or biting.

Wine symbolic of blessings:

The fact that wine is celebrated means that far from being forbidden in the OT, or even merely tolerated, wine is a drink of choice

Dt.7:13 *“And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to give your fathers.”*

Joel 3:18 *“the mountains will drip with sweet wine.”*

Is.25:6 *“And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces of marrow, and refined, aged wine.”*

Ps.4:7 *“Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound.”*

Ps.104:14-14 *“He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine which makes man’s heart glad.”*

Gen.27:28 *“May God give you...an abundance of grain and new wine.”*

Gen.14:18 *“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he is a priest of God Most High.”*

Ecc1.10:19 *“Men prepare a meal for enjoyment and wine makes life merry.”*

Ecc1.9:7 *“Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved of your works.”*

Zech.10:7 *“And Ephraim will be like a mighty man, and their heart will be glad as if from wine...”*

SOS.1:2 *“May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine...”*

SOS 5:1 *“I have come into my garden, my sister...I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk...”*

Please note: In Hebrew (new)wine is distinguished from grape juice:

Numbers 6:3 *a Nazirite... “shall abstain from wine (yayin) and strong drink (shekar); he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, neither shall he drink any grape juice (enab mishrah)...”* (Gen.40:11 says grape squeezed into a cup, does not use yayin)

The clear implication is that any one who has not taken this vow may enjoy these things.

Wine symbolic of cursing (judgment):

Is.1:22 *“Your silver has become dross, Your drink diluted with water..”*

Ez.23:31-34 *“thus says the Lord God, ‘You will drink your sister’s cup, which is deep and wide. You will be laughed at and held in derision; it contains much. You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of horror and desolation...”*

Is.63:6 *“I trod down the people’s in my anger, and made them drunk in my wrath, and poured out their lifeblood on the earth.”*

Ps. 60:3 *“Thou hast made thy people experience hardship; thou hast given us wine to drink that makes us stagger.”*

Is.51:17 (22) *“you have drunk from the Lord’s hand the cup of his anger, the chalice of reeling you have drained to the dregs.”*

Jer.51:7 *“Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord, intoxicating all the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine; therefore the nations are going mad.”*

Rev.14:10 *“...and he (who worships the beast) will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”*

Rev.16:19 *“...And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath.”*

God is making people drunk. Not literally, but figuratively. Why this image? Why not crippling, blinding, drowning, losing hair, eating manure?

1. As we’ve just seen, it is appropriate because wine symbolizes both curse and blessing.
2. Just as the abuse of wine produces intoxication, so the abuse of any good gift produces sin. (God calls spiritual idolatry harlotry/adultery.)
3. Sin is as dehumanizing as drunkenness. Sin takes us out of our good senses as does drunkenness. Hos.4:11 *“...harlotry, wine (yayin) and new wine (tirosh) take away the understanding (heart)* People choose to sin even as they choose to get drunk; therefore, the soul that chooses sin over God is as foolish as a drunk.
4. Drunkenness is, therefore a picture of intoxication with sin. Nothing could be more dehumanizing. Un-forgiven sin will incur God’s wrath, because sin inflames His heart to judgment. When we drink of God’s wrath in judgment we experience the ultimate disintegration of our humanity. We weren’t made for sin or judgment!

Notice God doesn’t say wine itself is bad. It is the abuse of wine that’s bad. Jesus said, *“It is not what goes into a man that defiles him...”*

God offers us wine:

Is.55:1 *“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”*

Prov.9:5 *“Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars; she has prepared her food, she has mixed her wine.”*

Deut. 14:26 *“And you shall spend your money for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or wine (yayin), or strong drink (shekar), or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household.”*

God commands wine as an offering to Him:

Ex.29:40 *“...and there shall be one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a libation with one lamb...”*

Numbers 28:7 *“pour out a libation of strong drink to the Lord”*

We have to live with a tension here. God gives something that can be abused; but it’s true with many things: authority, sex, sleep, words, food, work, etc. To forbid the use of something God gives

is legalism, binding the conscience where God has not. To play it safe and abstain where God has freed us is to have higher ethics than God.

With the tension is a warning: Don't be intoxicated by any of these.

The Bible warns against slavery to alcohol:

Is.5:11 *"Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink; who stay up late they wine may inflame them."*

and severely condemns drunkenness:

1 Cor.6:10 *"nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God."*

Eph.5:18 *"Do not be drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Holy Spirit..."*

Noah planted a vineyard apparently with God's blessing, but then got drunk.

Prov.20:1 *"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise."*

Notice that this verse makes the quantity of wine consumed a wisdom issue. So is the circumstance under which wine is used:

Prov.23:29 *"Who has woe and sorrow? Those who linger long over wine..."*

Prov.23:20 *"...don't be with heavy drinkers of wine."*

31:4 *"it is not for kings to drink and forget what is decreed, yet give wine to him who is perishing."*

Lev.10:9 *"...don't drink wine or strong drink when you come into the tent of meeting."*

(Notice in each of the above wine drinking itself is assumed and not unlawful; by implication you are free to use under other circumstances.)

Notice the distinction made between Jesus and John the Baptist; John took vow of poverty and abstinence, Jesus did not and was accused of being a drunk:

Matt.11:19 *"The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard.'"*

The issue with how we use God's blessings is always the heart. From the heart flow all sins. (Mark 7:15-23)

If the OT indicates it can be safe to use alcohol is moderation, does the NT?

Some try to argue that the wine mentioned in the NT is grape juice, or wine watered down 4x with water. If so, the connection between wine and drunkenness makes no sense. Some wine was watered down to improve taste; nevertheless, warnings against drunkenness clearly imply it was potent enough to cause inebriation.

Some examples:

1. 1 Tim3:8 an officer *"not addicted to much wine"* Why addicted if it's so watered down?
2. Acts 2:13 *"Others were mocking saying, 'They are full of sweet wine.'"*
3. 1 Cor. 11: *"When you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk."* At the agape meal- some are drunk. Why? Because the wine they drank made them so. This tells us that the early church understood that at the last supper Jesus used wine
4. Paul tells Timothy, *"use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments."* (1 Tim.5:23)
5. At the wedding at Cana the wine ran out. (John 2:10) *"Every man serves the good wine first"*, but Jesus provisions surpass those of the Old Covenant.

6. In Romans 14:21 it is the weaker brother, the one whose conscience is not informed as it should be, who stumbles when another drinks wine, which we are free to do.

Please note: The Greek word for grape juice (trux) is not used in the NT.

Now let's return to Gethsemane: the cup Jesus drank was full of the fury of His Father's wrath. That's why he didn't want it. In his suffering and at the cross He drank that cup that foamed with the wine of God's wrath for all who trust in him

2. Why does Jesus drink it?

He knew exactly what it represented- the bitter wrath of God It was the only way.
Jesus obeyed His Father perfectly. *"Not my will but yours be done."*
Jesus loved you in doing so. *"I lay my life down for my sheep."*
He went to the extreme for you. Can you for him?
Because of his deep love you will never taste that wrath! (Romans 8:1)

3. What happened to it?

Jesus cup of cursing was transformed into the cup of blessing by virtue of the cross.
Predicted by Is. 25:6-8

"And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, even the veil which is stretched over all nations. He will swallow up death for all time, and the Lord God will wipe tears from all faces, and He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth..."

1 Cor. 10:16 *"Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ?"*

We use wine in accordance with the biblical picture of blessing. We're not intoxicated by it, but we are reminded of the intoxicating effect of the gospel. It makes our hearts merry.

Historical note:

The Baptist Confession of 1689 stipulates the use of wine at the Lord's Supper. This is in keeping with the practice of the Christian church universally until the temperance movement of the late 1800s. In 1869 Dr. Thomas Welch, a New Jersey dentist and communion steward at the Methodist church, applied the pasteurization process developed by Louis Pasteur to the juice of grapes. He succeeded in producing grape juice, first sold as Dr. Welch's Unfermented Wine in 1890, then later changed to Dr. Welch's Grape Juice. Most of American Christianity was subsequently gripped by the temperance movement and wine disappeared from the Lord's Supper.