

The Riddle of the Cup

Based on Proverbs 23:19-21, 29-35 | Applying Wisdom: Alcohol

"Who has woe? Who has sorrow?... Those who linger over wine." — Proverbs 23:29-30

SERMON SUMMARY

This sermon continued the summer Proverbs series, applying wisdom to a genuinely difficult subject: alcohol. Having applied wisdom to work, words, and wealth, the series now turns to wine. The preacher opened by acknowledging honestly that this is a hard topic — because everyone comes to it with different backgrounds and experiences. For some, alcohol is a non-issue. For others, it's a theological curiosity. And for others, it is a deeply personal and painful matter — a family member who struggled, a present struggle of their own, or public shame carried into the room. The sermon named the preacher's dual task: to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, asking everyone to open their hearts to hear not the sermon they want but the one God has for them.

Alcohol Is a Riddle

The sermon began with riddles — a candle that grows shorter as it grows older, a map with cities but no houses. A riddle is a question whose answer isn't immediately clear; it requires reflection and wisdom. And the Christian relationship to alcohol is exactly that: a riddle, not a simple answer. Fittingly, when Proverbs takes up alcohol, it begins with a riddle.

In this section of Proverbs (the "sayings of the wise"), the sages usually give one-line proverbs — but on alcohol they slow down and give seven verses in a row, opening with a six-part riddle: "Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?" The answer: "Those who linger over wine." The language matters — this isn't the occasional or moderate drinker, but the one whose heart hovers over the cup, who gazes at the wine. One scholar calls the theme "the self-destructive nature of drinking excessive amounts of alcohol."

Proverbs 23:31-32 "Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper."

The passage takes the son to the local watering hole to watch the drunkard: alcohol impairs the mind ("your eyes will see strange sights, your mind imagine confusing things" — the opposite of wisdom's clear observation of reality), the body ("like one sleeping on the high seas" — drunk as a sailor), and self-awareness ("they hit me but I'm not hurt... when will I wake up so I can find another drink?"). As the sermon put it, alcohol is "liquid larceny" — it takes, it doesn't give. Proverbs is clear: alcohol is a riddle, and the dangers are real.

Observing the World: What Alcohol Actually Is

Wisdom observes reality, so the sermon observed alcohol plainly. It is a natural result of a creational process: yeast metabolizes the sugars in fruit or grain, producing CO₂ and ethanol (something lowans know well). When consumed, ethanol reaches the brain and does three things: it boosts GABA (the brain's brakes, which is why drinking reduces anxiety), it deadens other brain signals (slurred speech, lost balance), and it stimulates the dopamine reward center. The result: relaxation and a bit of pleasure. Because this chemistry is universal to biology, alcohol is universal to culture — found in nearly every civilization across 9,000 years.

The sermon then observed our culture. According to Gallup, 54% of Americans drink — the lowest in the 90 years of the survey, partly because research increasingly suggests alcohol isn't safe at any amount. But the harm remains staggering: roughly 178,000 U.S. deaths a year from excess alcohol (3 million globally, per the WHO), with alcohol involved in about 40% of traffic fatalities, 40% of homicides, 40% of sexual assaults, and about 50% of domestic abuse. Roughly one in ten drinkers has an alcohol use disorder in a given year — meaning in any congregation, a real number of people are quietly struggling. And Iowa, the sermon noted soberly, has ranked highest in the nation for binge drinking.

Three Different Things: Drinking, Drunkenness, Alcoholism

The sermon's key clarifying move was to separate three terms we tend to collapse. You can drink your whole life and never be drunk. You can get drunk without being an alcoholic. You can be an alcoholic without getting drunk. These are different things, and Scripture treats them differently.

Drinking — a mixed bag in Scripture.

Priests couldn't drink before serving (Leviticus 10); Nazirites vowed to abstain. Yet the Bible is often positive: wine "gladdens the heart of man" (Psalm 104); Ecclesiastes says to drink your wine with a joyful heart; the coming of the Messiah is pictured as new wine dripping from the mountains (Amos); Jesus's first miracle turned water into wine; he gave the cup at the Last Supper; and 1 Timothy 5 tells Timothy to "use a little wine" for his stomach. On balance, drinking is not universally praised, but it is generally treated as a positive thing.

Drunkenness — always wrong.

Here Scripture has nothing positive to say. The Bible is full of drunkenness leading to disaster — Noah, Lot, and others. "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler" (Proverbs 20:1). The New Testament repeatedly lists drunkenness alongside orgies, debauchery, and sexual immorality (Romans 13, Galatians 5, 1 Peter 4). The Bible does not condone getting buzzed or drunk as harmless fun. It is sin.

Alcoholism — a sin that becomes a disease.

Alcoholism is a disorder marked by loss of control and addiction, interfering with major life functions — health, family, job, spiritual life, friendships. It doesn't require getting drunk; a "high-functioning" alcoholic may never appear drunk while it quietly interferes (a missed game because of a hangover, a spouse calling in sick for you). Titus warns against being addicted; 1 Corinthians says "everything is permissible, but I will not be mastered by anything" — your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Anything that masters us other than Jesus is wrong.

Putting it together: drinking is a wisdom issue (better/worse, not right/wrong); drunkenness is a moral issue (a sin — "stop it"); alcoholism is a moral issue that becomes a medical one (a sin that becomes a disease — "get help in community"). The right biblical response differs for each: for drinking, choose what is best; for drunkenness, stop; for alcoholism, find help.

1 Corinthians 6:12 "'I have the right to do anything,' you say — but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' — but I will not be mastered by anything."

The Wisdom Question: Four Christian Approaches to Drinking

Turning to drinking as a wisdom issue, the sermon laid out four positions Christians take — while first insisting that no one hearing this should take the discussion of drinking as permission to remain in drunkenness or addiction.

- Prohibition — any alcohol, for anyone, anytime is sin. The sermon judged this wrong: it's legalistic (as if a rule makes us right with God), judgmental of others, and ungrateful (calling part of God's good creation evil).
- Abstention — choosing not to drink is a good, righteous choice (without calling alcohol itself sinful).
- Moderation — moderate use is righteous; a good Christian can drink in moderation.
- Permission — any alcohol anytime is fine, no big deal. The sermon judged this wrong too: it's blind to Scripture's real warnings that drunkenness and addiction are destructive and sinful.

Positions one and four are both wrong. The space of wisdom is the two middle ones — abstention and moderation. Both agree that drinking itself is not a sin but drunkenness and alcoholism are, and both share a deeper logic: given healthy motives and positive fruit, moderate consumption is permissible under Christian freedom. There is genuine freedom here to abstain or to drink moderately, so we must be careful not to rank each other as grade-A and grade-B Christians.

Permissible, But Is It Beneficial?

And yet, the sermon suggested, there is good reason abstention may be the wiser course for many of us — because Scripture distinguishes what is permissible from what is beneficial. Four dangers make drinking especially risky: (1) addiction — every alcoholic began with one sip, and you can't know in advance whether you'll be bound; (2) the temptation to excess — alcohol uniquely impairs the very brain you need to say no (you never see someone passed out on a corner with a bag of Twinkies); (3) damage to God's temple, if it isn't healthy; and (4) causing offense or stumbling to others — both the legalist who thinks it's sin and the struggler who takes it as permission.

So moderation is a wise choice, and abstention is a wise choice. The question for each of us, in wisdom, is not just "is it permissible?" but "is it beneficial?" And crucially, both abstainer and moderate drinker are part of the same family. Jesus noted that John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking and was called demon-possessed, while the Son of Man came eating and drinking and was called a glutton and a drunkard — "but wisdom is proved right by all her children." Our identity is not found in how much we drink, but in whose we are.

Two Graces: Community and a Deeper Identity

The sermon closed with two gifts of grace. First, the grace of community. Notice that the Proverbs passage ends with the drunkard himself speaking — blind to his own pain: "They hit me but I'm not hurt... when will I wake up so I can find another drink?" The only way such a person knows they have a problem is through a community of grace willing to tell them the truth. So the sermon issued a direct challenge: if you drink, have a hard, honest conversation this week with people who love you — "Have you ever seen me drunk? Have you ever wondered if I drink too much?" — and don't answer on your own. Ask those who love you to show their love by telling the truth, and listen.

Second, the grace of a deeper identity. Another word for wine and beer is "spirits" — and God offers us a different Spirit. Ephesians 5: "Do not get drunk on wine... instead, be filled with the Spirit." The point of living is not to find the line — how many beers, how much wine — but to ask: am I moving toward Jesus, being filled with his Spirit, so that all I do is for his glory? And the fruit of that Spirit (Galatians 5) includes self-control — the very thing that lets us discern in wisdom what is best.

| **Ephesians 5:18** "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

Benjamin's Story

The sermon ended with the testimony of Benjamin — raised in a Christian family in rural Ohio, saved at age eight, who found music and began playing guitar on his church praise team. Playing gigs at a local bar drew him into drinking; caught at 18, kicked off the praise team, he could only make music at the bar and drank more. When his mother died of breast cancer when he was 20, he spent the night of her funeral draining a bottle of whiskey, beginning a decade-long spiral of addiction and anger at God. He wrote that alcohol was "liquid larceny" that took nearly everything.

At the bottom, he called an old friend, Missy, and told her he was sick. She spoke life into him and shared the gospel — telling him both that he was forgiven in Christ AND that he needed to quit drinking, and that she would get help with him. In a borrowed apartment with no electricity, going through a box of old things, he found his late mother's worn Bible, turned to Proverbs (which his father had read to them), and read the very riddle of this text — "Who has woe? Who has sorrow?" — recognizing, "that was me." He cried out to Jesus and was saved and changed. Benjamin is now sober, married to Missy, and they have a ministry to those who struggle with alcohol. The riddle of alcohol points to the One who made creation, redeems us, forgives us, and sets us free.

Key Takeaway

Alcohol is a riddle — which is why Proverbs answers it with a riddle. Drinking is a wisdom issue (better or worse), drunkenness is a sin (stop), and alcoholism is a sin that becomes a disease (get help). There is real freedom to abstain or drink moderately — but the wise question is not just "is it permissible?" but "is it beneficial?" Our identity is never in how much we drink, but in whose we are. And the answer to the riddle is the One who forgives and sets us free.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. This is a sensitive topic — create a safe, gracious space, and share only what you're comfortable sharing.

1

The sermon named that we each come to this topic differently — for some it's a non-issue, for some a theological curiosity, and for some deeply personal and painful. Where do you find yourself coming from as you approach this subject? (Share only what feels comfortable.)

2

The sermon said we all have "the ability to hear the sermon we want and not the sermon we need." As you consider this topic honestly, which do you think you're more tempted toward — hearing a message that comforts a complacency, or one that adds shame to a struggle? What do you actually need to hear?

3

The sermon carefully distinguished three things: drinking (a wisdom issue), drunkenness (a sin), and alcoholism (a sin that becomes a disease). Why does it matter to keep these distinct rather than collapsing them together? How have you seen them confused?

4

Of the four Christian approaches — prohibition, abstention, moderation, permission — which did you grow up with or hold? The sermon said the wisdom space is abstention and moderation. Does that framing challenge your assumptions in any way?

5

"Permissible, but is it beneficial?" The sermon gave four reasons abstention might be the wiser course for many. Which of those four reasons — addiction risk, temptation to excess, bodily health, or causing others to stumble — speaks most to you?

6

The drunkard in the passage is blind to his own pain: "They hit me but I'm not hurt." The sermon said the only way we know we have a problem is a community willing to tell us the truth. How good are you at letting people who love you tell you hard truths? Who has that permission in your life?

7

"Do not get drunk on wine... instead be filled with the Spirit." The sermon said the deepest question isn't where the line is, but whether we're moving toward Jesus. How does anchoring identity in Christ rather than in what we consume change the whole conversation?

LIVING IT OUT

Alcohol is a riddle that requires wisdom. This week's invitation is honesty — with God, with yourself, and with the people who love you.

In Your Inner Life

- Read Proverbs 23:19-21 and 29-35 slowly this week. Sit honestly with the riddle and its answer. Ask God, without defensiveness, to show you the truth about your own relationship with alcohol — whatever that truth is.
- The sermon asked the wisdom question: not just "is this permissible?" but "is this beneficial?" Apply that question this week to alcohol and to anything else in your life that might be permissible but not beneficial. What is it forming in you?
- Meditate on Ephesians 5:18 — "be filled with the Spirit." Ask honestly what you tend to reach for to relax, numb, or find joy, and whether it's crowding out the deeper filling God offers. Bring that honestly to prayer.

In Your Closest Relationships

- This is the sermon's most direct challenge: if you drink, have an honest conversation this week with people who love you. Ask them plainly: "Have you ever seen me drunk? Have you ever wondered if I drink too much?" Don't answer for yourself — ask, and truly listen.
- If someone you love is struggling with alcohol, remember Missy's example: she spoke both grace and truth — "you are forgiven" AND "you need to stop, and I'll get help with you." Ask God for the courage and gentleness to speak both to someone who needs it, if the moment is right.

- The sermon warned against ranking each other as "grade-A" and "grade-B" Christians over abstention vs. moderation. Is there someone whose choice about alcohol you've quietly judged — in either direction? Release that judgment this week and receive them as family.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon noted alcohol is "liquid larceny" — it takes more than it gives. Whatever your own practice, take an honest inventory this week of what alcohol (or any habit) may be quietly taking from you: time, money, presence, health, relationships. Name it plainly.
- Wisdom is observation of reality. This week, observe honestly — without judgment or defensiveness — the role alcohol plays in the settings around you: your workplace, your social life, your community. What patterns do you notice? What would wisdom counsel?
- If abstention is a wise course you've never seriously considered, consider it this week — even as an experiment. Notice what it reveals: about your habits, your social pressures, and where you turn for relaxation and joy.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon grounded everything in "the grace of community" — a body that can tell us the truth in love. How safe is your faith community for honest conversation about struggles like this? What would it take to make it safer — more grace, less judgment, more truth-telling?
- Roughly one in ten drinkers struggles with alcohol in a given year — meaning people in your own congregation are quietly struggling right now. Without prying, be the kind of person others could safely confide in. Ask God to make you a source of grace, not shame, this week.
- Benjamin was set free through a friend who spoke the gospel and walked with him toward help. Is there someone in your community walking a hard road with alcohol who needs a companion, not a critic? Consider how you might come alongside them — or point them toward help — this week.

A Word to Carry

You are not defined by how much or how little you drink — you are defined by whose you are. Drunkenness is never God's intent for his people, and no addiction is ever his design. But grace runs deeper than both: forgiveness beyond imagining, and freedom beyond our own ability to find. The answer to the riddle is a Person who forgives and sets free.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

The grace of community is the ability to speak and receive truth in love. This week, be a safe, gracious presence for someone who needs it.

This Week's Challenge: Be a Community of Grace and Truth

Missy spoke both grace and truth to Benjamin — "you're forgiven" and "you need help, and I'll walk with you." This week, be that kind of presence — and be willing to receive it too.

Step 1 — Start With Yourself.

Before reaching outward, do the honest self-examination the sermon urged. If you drink, ask the people who love you the hard questions this week — and genuinely listen. Grace begins with our own honesty before God and others.

Step 2 — Name Someone Who Needs a Companion.

Think of one person who may be struggling — with alcohol or another burden they feel alone in. Not to fix or confront harshly, but to walk with. Write their name down. (If no one comes to mind, ask God to make you the safe person someone can come to.)

Step 3 — Show Up With Grace First.

Reach out with love, not condemnation — the drunkard is often already blind to his pain and full of shame. Lead with presence and acceptance. Let them know they are not alone and not beyond grace. The gospel comes before the correction.

Step 4 — Speak Truth, and Offer to Walk Toward Help.

If it's right, gently speak the truth in love — as Missy did — and offer not just words but companionship toward help. "I'll go with you." For addiction, the Bible's counsel isn't "stop it" but "get help in community." Be part of that community. Pray with them if welcome.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share (With Discretion).

If you're in a small group, share what you're learning about being a community of grace and truth — while carefully protecting anyone's confidence. Some of this work is private, and love guards what it's been trusted with.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Read the full sweep of what Scripture says about alcohol this week: the cautions (Proverbs 20:1, 23:29-35, Ephesians 5:18, Galatians 5:19-21) alongside the affirmations (Psalm 104:14-15, John 2:1-11, 1 Timothy 5:23). Hold the whole picture together, as the sermon did, rather than a single verse.
- Reflect honestly on the sermon's distinction between permissible and beneficial — not just about alcohol, but across your life. Make a short, honest list of things that are permissible for you but may not be beneficial, and prayerfully consider what wisdom would counsel about each.
- If you or someone you love is struggling, take one concrete step this week toward help — a conversation with a trusted person, a call to a pastor, or reaching out to a recovery community. The Bible's word for addiction is not "try harder alone" but "find help in community." There is no shame in the step; there is grace in it.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — for a God who both made creation in its natural processes and redeems, forgives, and sets us free; and for the grace of a community that can speak truth in love.
- Confess honestly — the foolishness of pride (thinking abstaining makes us better than others) and the foolishness of seeking identity, joy, or escape at the bottom of a bottle.
- Ask for wisdom and courage — wisdom to discern what is not just permissible but beneficial, and courage to ask (or answer) hard questions with the people who love us this week.
- Pray for freedom — for anyone struggling with drunkenness or addiction, that God would bring forgiveness beyond imagining and freedom beyond our own ability to find, through Christ and through community.

"I cried out to Jesus, and he saved me. He also started changing me by the power of his Spirit."

— Benjamin's testimony, From This Week's Sermon

If you or someone you love is struggling with alcohol, please reach out to a pastor, a trusted friend, or a support resource. You don't have to walk it alone — and there is no shame in asking for help.