

## The Proper Use of Food and Drink

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,  
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1846),  
Vol. IV, 155-158, emphasis added and English updated.

The Westminster Larger Catechism maintains that God's moral law requires the virtues of temperance, modesty, and sobriety. Questions 135, 136, 138, and 139 argue that gluttony and drunkenness are violations of the sixth and seventh commandments of the moral law of God. In the thinking of the Westminster Assembly of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, both vices are harmful to your health and life and thus a form of suicide. Additionally, drunkenness is a factor that contributes to many homicides and fatal traffic accidents. In regard to the seventh commandment, both vices appeal to the lusts of the flesh and are symptomatic of a lack of self-control. Drunkenness is especially associated with sexually immoral behavior.

John Calvin teaches Christians how to properly use food and drink and helps us to avoid the twin traps of legalism and licentiousness.

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### PSALM 104:14-15

14 He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, And vegetation for the service of man,  
That he may bring forth food from the earth, 15 And wine *that* makes glad the heart of  
man, Oil to make *his* face shine, And bread *which* strengthens man's heart.

The Psalmist now comes to men, of whom God promises to take special care of as His children. After having spoken of the brute creation, he declares, that wheat is produced, and bread made of it, for the nourishment of the human race; and he mentions in addition to this, wine and oil, two things which not only supply the need of mankind, but also contribute to their cheerful enjoyment of life. . . . The prophet, in stating that God causes the earth to bring forth *herbs* [vegetation] for the support of men, intends to say that the earth supplies them not only with food in wheat, but also with other herbs and fruits; for the means of our sustenance is not limited exclusively to one kind of food.

***Drinking wine is not inherently sinful. God supplies man's needs (bread and water), but He also liberally bestows on us even more abundantly (oil, wine, fruit, vegetables, etc.)***

**15. *And wine that cheers the heart of man.*** In these words we are taught, that God not only provides for men's necessity, and bestows on them as much as is sufficient for the ordinary purposes of life, but that **in His goodness God deals still more bountifully with them by cheering their hearts with wine and oil.**

Nature would certainly be satisfied with water to drink; and therefore **the addition of wine is owing to God's superabundant liberality.** The expression, *and oil to make his face to shine*, has been explained in different ways. As sadness spreads a gloom over the countenance, some give this exposition, That when men enjoy the commodities of wine and oil, their faces shine with gladness. . . . Others . . . take the meaning to be, that wine makes men's faces shine more than if they were anointed with oil. But the prophet,

I have no doubt, speaks of healing oils, meaning that God not only bestows on men what is sufficient for their moderate use, but that He goes beyond this, giving them even their delicacies.

The words in the last clause, *and bread that sustains man's heart*, I interpret thus: Bread would be sufficient to support the life of man, but God over and above, to use a common expression, bestows on them wine and oil. The repetition then of the purpose which bread serves is not superfluous: it is employed to commend to us **the goodness of God in His tenderly and abundantly nourishing men as a kind-hearted father does his children**. For this reason, it is here stated again, that as God shows Himself a foster-father sufficiently bountiful in providing bread, His liberality appears still more conspicuous in giving us dainties [delicious, rich things].

***A warning against overindulgence, which leads to gluttony and drunkenness***

But as there is nothing to which we are more prone, than to abuse God's benefits by giving way to excess, the more bountiful He is towards men, the more ought they to take care not to pollute, by their intemperance, the abundance which is presented before them. Paul had therefore good reason for giving that prohibition (Romans 13:14) "Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts of it"; for if we give full scope to the desires of the flesh, there will be no bounds [no end].

***God calls us to self-restraint and moderation in food and drink.***

**As God bountifully provides for us, so He has appointed a law of temperance [moderation], that each may voluntarily restrain himself in his abundance.** He sends out oxen and asses into pastures, and they content themselves with a sufficiency; but while furnishing us with more than we need, **He enjoins on us an observance of the rules of moderation**, that we may not voraciously devour His benefits; **and in lavishing upon us a more abundant supply of good things than our necessities require, He puts our moderation to the test.**

***The proper use of food and drink is to sustain your health, not to make you obese and drunk. Obesity and drunkenness bring oppression, not joy.***<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin adds in his sermons on Ephesians:

If a man is a friend to another and allows him to be such a glutton as to meat and drink that in the end he kills himself, is it to be said that his flattering of him in that way, and his foolish humouring of all his appetites, is friendship? So then, if we see a poor man about to throw himself headlong into destruction, we clearly show ourselves to be rather traitors than friends to him, if we do not endeavour to restrain him. (p. 482)

Commenting on Ephesians 5:18, "And do not be drunk with wine, wherein is looseness, but be filled with the Spirit," Calvin warns,

For they that burst themselves with eating and drinking, and recognize no bounds until they can take no more, well show that they have no apprehension of the kingdom of God, and have never tasted what the heavenly life is. . . .

. . . all they who gorge themselves in that way and cannot satisfy themselves except by acting like beasts, clearly show that they do not have so much as one drop of faith, or the

The proper rule with respect to the use of bodily sustenance, is to partake of it that it may sustain, but not oppress us. The mutual communication of the things needful for the support of the body, which God has enjoined upon us, is a very good check to intemperance; for the condition upon which the rich are favored with their abundance is, that they should relieve the wants of their brethren.

***It is proper to use wine (and, by extension, grape juice, chocolate, etc.) to make you merry.***

As the prophet in this account of the divine goodness in providence makes no reference to the excesses of men, we gather from his words that **it is lawful to use wine not only in cases of necessity, but also thereby to make us merry.**

***It is not proper to over-indulge in food or drink; God calls us to be sober-minded and to maintain moderation.***

This mirth must however be tempered with sobriety, first, that men may not forget themselves, drown their senses, and destroy their strength, but rejoice before their God, according to the injunction of Moses (Leviticus 23:40); and, secondly, that they may exhilarate their minds under a sense of gratitude, so as to be rendered more active in the service of God.

He who rejoices in this way will also be always prepared to endure sadness, whenever God is pleased to send it. That rule of Paul ought to be kept in mind (Philippians 4:12) "I have learned to abound—I have learned to suffer want." If some token of the divine anger is manifest, even he who has an overflowing abundance of all kinds of dainty [rich] food, will restrict himself in his diet knowing that he is called to put on sackcloth, and to sit among ashes.

***The poor should not feel entitled to expensive food and drink. In our poverty, we should content ourselves with bread and water and less lavish food and drink.***

Much more ought he whom poverty compels to be temperate and sober, to abstain from such delicacies. In short, if one man is constrained to abstain from wine by sickness, if another has only vapid [cheap, flat] wine, and a third nothing but water, let each be content with his own lot, and willingly and submissively wean himself from those gratifications which God denies him.

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fear of God, or of religion in them, but that their belly rules them and that they are so subject to it as to their personal and chief idol. Now seeing that this is so, let us learn to long after food for our souls. And since it is offered liberally to us at all times, insomuch that it is God's whole desire that we should have all that suffices for our salvation, let us whet our appetites to take such repast, and then we shall be sure that our other means will not allure us to such gluttony that we shall become like insatiable pits, but we shall be contented with having what is expedient and for our necessity, or at least for our usage. (pp. 550-551)

(John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1973).

The same remarks apply to oil. We see from this passage that oils were much in use among the Jews, as well as among the other eastern nations. At the present day, it is different with us, who rather keep ointments for medicinal purposes, than use them as articles of luxury. The prophet, however, says, that oil also is given to men, that they may anoint themselves with it. But as men are too prone to pleasure, it is to be observed, that the law of temperance ought not to be separated from the beneficence of God, lest they abuse their liberty by indulging in luxurious excess.

This exception must always be added, that no person may take encouragement from this doctrine to **licentiousness**. Moreover, when men have been carefully taught to bridle their lust, it is important for them to know, that **God permits them to enjoy pleasures in moderation, where there is the ability to provide them**; else they will never partake even of bread and wine with a tranquil conscience; yea, they will begin to scruple about the tasting of water, at least they will never come to the table [the Lord's Supper] but in fearfulness. Meanwhile, the greater part of the world will wallow in pleasures without discrimination, because they do not consider what God permits them; for His fatherly kindness should be to us the best mistress to teach us moderation.

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Calvin exhorts us to beware of the twin traps of legalism and licentiousness.

On the one hand, the "hyper-Puritan" legalists may call us to abstain from all pleasures, including wine, oil, grape juice, strawberries, meat, cheese, and chocolate, lest we indulge our carnal desires. Calvin responds that God permits us to enjoy pleasures in moderation, as God provides "wine *that* makes glad the heart of man, Oil to make *his* face shine, And bread *which* strengthens man's heart" (Ps. 104:15).

On the other hand, the licentious exploit the doctrine of Christian liberty to justify over-indulging the flesh. Instead of exercising self-restraint, the licentious overeat and overdrink, which is sinful. Gluttony and drunkenness are sins that enslave men; they harm men's bodies, minds, and souls. God calls us to sobriety, to sobermindedness.

God calls His people to temperance, to moderation, and to self-restraint. He blesses us with food and drink--bread, wine, and oil—for our good, not our destruction. The faithful are called to make use of God's blessings and enjoy them, giving thanks to God and doing all things to His glory (1 Cor. 10:31).