

Forbidden Practices

The Old and New Testaments include lists of prohibitions for things like idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, stealing, and other sinful acts. But one we often skip over, or may sit more vaguely on the page, are prohibitions against sorcery. Especially in our culture of science and reason, occult and mystical things were for a long time discredited and stayed in the shadows. But especially with the emergence of New Age, and the mixing of New Age practices in the church, it's really important to stop and define these prohibitions and not leave them in vague categories.

Deuteronomy 18:9-14

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

Isaiah 47:12-13

Stand fast in your enchantments
and your many sorceries,
with which you have labored from your youth;
perhaps you may be able to succeed;
perhaps you may inspire terror.
You are wearied with your many counsels;
let them stand forth and save you,
those who divide the heavens,
who gaze at the stars,
who at the new moons make known
what shall come upon you.

In the Old Testament, turning to mediums was likened to spiritual adultery. And even as spiritual warfare shifted from the Old Testament to the New Testament, we find similar prohibitions listed.

Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery (**pharmakeia**), enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Pharmakeia in the Greek means medicine, poison, potion, or sorcery. In the Bible, it's exclusively used for sorcery and potion-making.

Acts 16:16-18

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination (**python**) and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

Python is the name of the Greek serpent killed by the Greek god Apollo, and also the old name for the city of Delphi, a city famous for its oracle, called the Pythia.

Acts 19:18-19

Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.

Conversions in Acts sometimes included the renouncing of the practice of magical arts. Economically, this amount of silver was worth 135 years of daily wages. A collection of Greek Magical Papyri that archaeologists have today shows these books likely contained prayers, recipes, ritual formulas, and spells. These spells would've included everything from charms, judicial, erotic, curse, divination, or invocation magic. So it is reasonable to assume the term **sorcery** or **magic arts** includes all of these things as well.

But before we go further, let's define some terms.

What is divination?

What is necromancy?

What is astrology?

What is sorcery?

Something important to note here is that the Bible does not deny that these things have some effect. Consider this passage from Micah:

Micah 5:10-15

And in that day, declares the LORD,
I will cut off your horses from among you
and will destroy your chariots;
and I will cut off the cities of your land
and throw down all your strongholds;
and I will cut off sorceries from your hand,
and you shall have no more tellers of fortunes;
and I will cut off your carved images
and your pillars from among you,
and you shall bow down no more
to the work of your hands;
and I will root out your Asherah images from among you
and destroy your cities.
And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance
on the nations that did not obey.

If all of this were just fantasy without substance, why would God declare that he is cutting off their sorceries and divination? Consider the words of Isaiah:

Isaiah 47:8-9

Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,
who sit securely,
who say in your heart,
“I am, and there is no one besides me;
I shall not sit as a widow
or know the loss of children”:
These two things shall come to you
in a moment, in one day;
the loss of children and widowhood
shall come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
and the great power of your enchantments.

The implication here isn't that the sorceries and enchantments are *powerless*, but rather that there is one who still stands more *powerful*.

These things **can** have power. They are not to be underestimated or trifled with. But God always stands sovereign over it all.

Double Standard?

A criticism you may hear leveled at Christians is the inconsistency with which we handle the supernatural. We prohibit witchcraft, divination, astrology, necromancy, mediums, etc.

And yet we see this in the text:

- Jesus speaks with Moses and Elijah, who are deceased. (Matthew 17:1-3)
- Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. (John 11:38-44)
- Lots are cast as part of a divine ritual. (Leviticus 16:8)
- God speaks to Israel often through prophets who tell of future events. (Amos 3:7)
- Daniel is gifted as an interpreter of dreams. (Daniel 2:27-28)
- Holy Spirit bestows supernatural gifts like healing & prophecy. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11)

Things that are regularly forbidden, Jesus appears to do, or God appears to require or gift. This requires that we approach spiritual practice with a nuanced theological understanding.

Just like the sacrificial system God created, there are other ways for the spiritual and physical to interact. These are intentional, purposeful, and given with boundaries that can be crossed and abused.

Divination, prophecy, and interpretation allow God to **reveal himself** to us. An act initiated **by God** for **His purpose** and directed under **His will**.

Divination outside of this boundary is what is forbidden. Divination that **humans initiate**, for **their purposes**, goes **against God's will**.

This is theologically consistent with:

- Sacrifice → God ordained, abuse leads to judgment and exile.
- Connection with God → We seek him through Jesus. Babel is destroyed and scattered
- Marriage → God ordained, adultery leads to suffering and sin.

God designs things with purpose and boundaries. When those boundaries are respected and the purpose fulfilled, God's creation is beautiful. It is when order is distorted and boundaries are crossed that we enter into disobedience, rebellion, and sin.

This does not mean certain techniques suddenly become holy when God uses them. The difference is that God may sovereignly reveal Himself, but humans are never authorized to engineer access to the unseen.

This Week's Takeaway

Why does God forbid practices that appear to "work"?

What are humans seeking when they initiate practices of divination?

Preparing for Next Week

To prepare for class next week, read the following passages and write down a few observations for each passage. This isn't about right answers or deep insight, just jot down what you notice and what stands out in each passage, or what questions you may have.

Genesis 4:6-7; Ephesians 4:6-7; 2 Corinthians 2:10-11; James 4:6-8; Galatians 5:16-25; 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 1 Peter 5:8-10;

Find these handouts and other resources at [DeeplyBiblical.com](https://www.DeeplyBiblical.com)