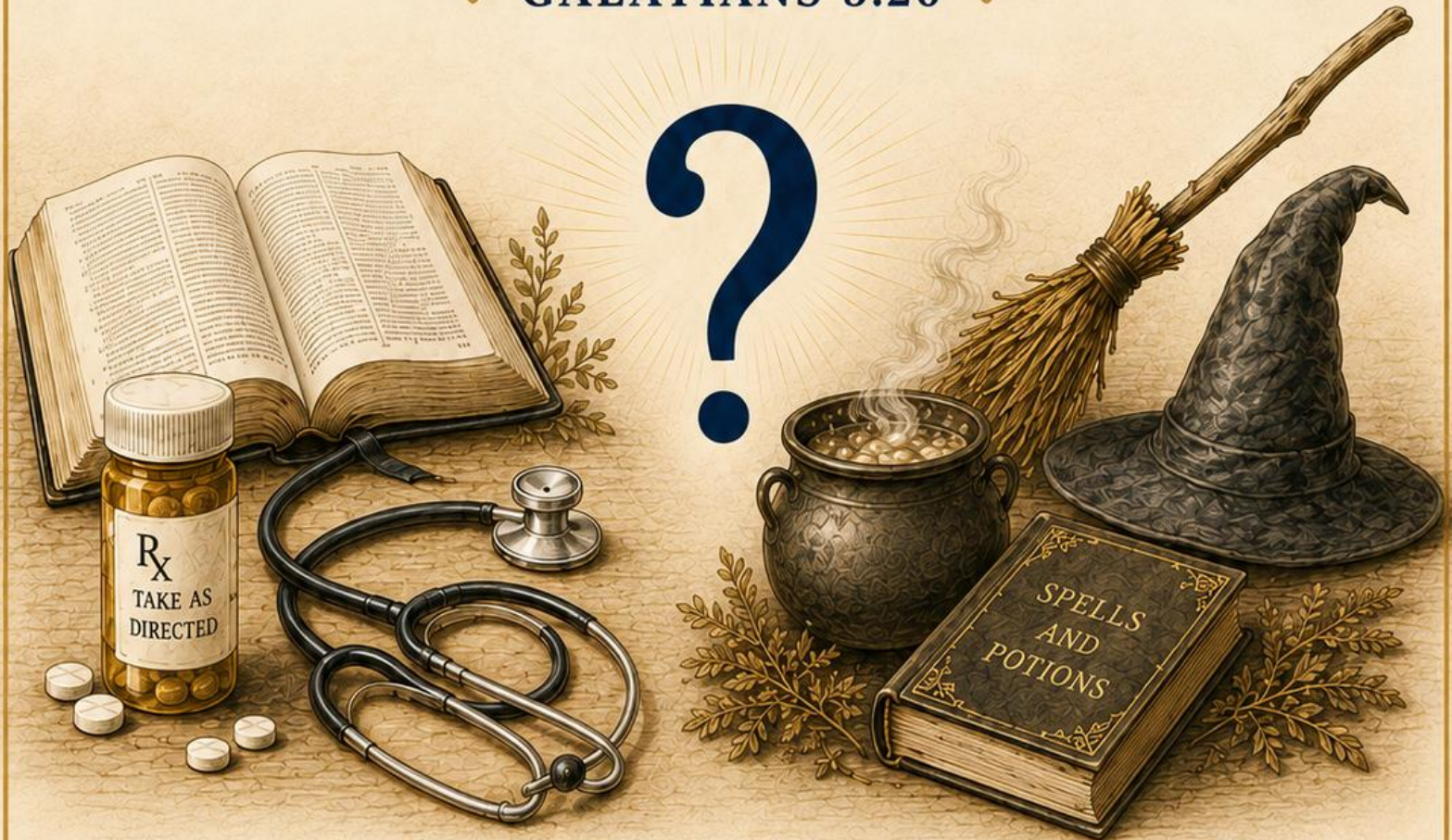


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

DOES THE BIBLE CALL MEDICINE WITCHCRAFT?

GALATIANS 5:20



DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

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SERMON TRANSCRIPT

**DOES THE BIBLE CALL
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Galatians 5:16–23

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Aloha,

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

I am grateful that you are here today.

If you are worshiping with us for the first time, you are not merely a visitor.

You are our honored guest.

We are glad that the Lord has brought you into this conversation.

At Reason Together Church, you are allowed to bring your questions.

You are allowed to admit that you do not understand something.

You are allowed to say that you have heard Christians make a claim, but you want to see whether the Bible actually supports it.

That is why our invitation is simple.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Before we begin, let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father,

Thank You for giving us another day and another opportunity to gather around Your Word.

Thank You for every person who is here and for every person who will receive this study somewhere else.

Give us wisdom today.

Protect us from fear, pride and careless conclusions.

Help us to listen carefully to what You have said.

Where we have believed something without examining it, correct us.

Where we have placed our trust in something other than You, call us back.

Where someone is carrying fear concerning illness, treatment or addiction, let Your Word bring truth, direction and hope.

Above all, help us see Jesus clearly.

In His precious name we pray.

Amen.

Our primary passage today is Galatians chapter 5, beginning with verse 16.

The Bible says:

“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,

Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”

May the Lord bless the reading of His Word.

Before we enter the study, let me briefly explain a few things about Reason Together Church.

We do not pass an offering plate.

There is a giving box available for members who are led to give, but our guests are never expected to contribute.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

Giving is an act of worship and the Bible teaches that it should never be done under compulsion.

If you would like us to stay in touch with you, our guest card asks only for your first name and email address.

We do not need your life history to welcome you into a conversation.

After the study, please join us at the Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free and so are the refills on conversations.

Now let us turn to the question before us.

Does the Bible call medicine witchcraft?

Most of us are careful when we take medicine.

We look at the label.

We want to know what is in the bottle.

We want to know how much we are supposed to take.

We look for warnings.

We ask whether it should be taken with food.

We ask whether it might react with something else.

We may read the label twice because we do not want to swallow something without understanding what it is.

But sometimes we swallow a religious claim without reading its label.

We see a sentence online.

We hear it in a video.

A sincere Christian repeats it.

It sounds spiritual.

It includes a Greek word.

Once a claim includes a Greek word, it can sound as though the argument has already been settled.

One claim has circulated for years.

It goes something like this:

“The Greek word translated witchcraft is pharmakeia.

That is where we get the word pharmacy.

Therefore, pharmaceutical medicine is witchcraft.”

At first, that sounds convincing.

There is a real connection between the words.

The word in Galatians 5:20 is pharmakeia.

The King James Bible translates it “witchcraft.”

Our modern words pharmacy, pharmaceutical and pharmacology belong historically to the same Greek word family.

Those facts are real.

But the conclusion does not automatically follow from those facts.

A linguistic relationship is not the same thing as a moral equivalence.

Before we decide that a prescription bottle and a witch’s potion are the same thing, we need to slow down and reason together.

If Paul meant that all medicine is witchcraft, we face some immediate questions.

Why did Paul call Luke “the beloved physician”?

Why did Paul recommend a physical treatment for Timothy’s stomach?

Why did Isaiah instruct that a lump of figs be placed upon Hezekiah’s boil?

Why did the Good Samaritan apply oil and wine to a wounded man?

Why did Jesus say that sick people need a physician?

We are not going to begin by pretending that every medication is safe.

We are not going to pretend that every doctor is right.

We are not going to pretend that every pharmaceutical company is honest.

We are not going to ignore addiction, overmedication, dangerous side effects or the misuse of powerful substances.

But neither are we going to place a burden upon people that God did not place upon them.

The question is not whether medicine can be misused.

Almost every good thing can be misused.

The question is whether the Bible identifies medicine itself as witchcraft.

To answer that, we need to examine the word.

The Greek word pharmakeia belongs to a larger family of words.

One related word is pharmakon.

In ancient Greek, pharmakon could refer broadly to a drug, medicine, remedy, poison, potion, charm or spell.

That is a wide range of meaning.

The same broad word could point toward something intended to heal or something intended to kill.

It could describe a remedy or a poison.

It could be connected with ordinary treatment or an occult potion.

The word alone did not tell the listener everything.

Context had to tell the listener which meaning was intended.

Think about a knife.

A surgeon may hold a knife.

A cook may hold a knife.

A criminal may hold a knife.

The surgeon may use it to save a life.

The cook may use it to prepare a meal.

The criminal may use it to take a life.

The presence of the knife does not make surgery, cooking and murder morally identical.

The instrument is not the complete act.

Purpose matters.

Context matters.

What someone is doing matters.

The same was true of ancient substances.

A person might prepare an herb to relieve suffering.

Another person might prepare a poison to harm an enemy.

Another might mix a potion as part of a magical ritual.

The fact that each person handled a physical substance did not make all three activities the same. Over time, pharmakeia became strongly associated with sorcery, magical arts, potions and poisoning. That is why Bible translators consistently use words such as witchcraft, sorcery, magic or magical spells in the New Testament passages where it appears.

But someone may say, “Pastor, the modern word pharmacy still comes from that family.”

Yes, the relationship is real.

The equivalence is not.

Words develop.

Meanings change.

Associations narrow or widen.

We cannot take every possible meaning of an ancient word, pour all of those meanings into a modern word and then transfer every moral judgment along with them.

If we did that, medicine, poison, dye, ointment, magic and murder could all be placed into one category.

That is not careful interpretation.

That is not how language works.

There is another overlooked fact.

Pharmakeia is not the only Greek word that the New Testament uses for sorcery or magic.

Acts chapter 8 tells us about Simon.

Acts 8:9 says:

“But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one.”

The Greek word there comes from the word family from which we get magician or magic.

It is not pharmakeia.

Acts chapter 13 describes Elymas as a sorcerer.

Again, the word is from the magos family.

This teaches us something important.

Not all Biblical sorcery is expressed by the word pharmakeia.

And not everything within the larger pharmakon word family is necessarily sorcery.

We cannot build a sound doctrine by noticing that two words look related and stopping there.

We must read the context.

So let us return to Galatians 5.

Paul did not insert the word into a medical discussion.

He was not writing about hospitals.

He was not giving instructions to physicians.

He was not describing the treatment of disease.

Paul was contrasting the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit.

Verse 16 says:

“Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.”

Verse 17 describes the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit.

Verse 18 speaks of being led by the Spirit.

Then Paul begins naming the works of the flesh.

When he reaches verse 20, he places two words together.

“Idolatry, witchcraft.”

That placement matters.

Witchcraft appears directly beside idolatry.

The subject is not ordinary health care.

The subject is spiritual rebellion.

The subject is seeking power, knowledge or control apart from God.

Idolatry gives worship to something other than God.

Sorcery seeks supernatural power apart from God.

These practices compete with the worship and authority of the Lord.

Paul’s concern is not merely what enters the body.

His concern is what rules the life.

Will I be ruled by the flesh?

Will I be ruled by an appetite?

Will I surrender myself to an occult power?

Will I attempt to manipulate spiritual forces?

Or will I walk in the Spirit of God?

That is the governing question of the passage.

Notice something else.

Paul lists witchcraft in verse 20.

Then he separately lists drunkenness in verse 21.

Those categories can overlap.

An ancient occult practice might involve intoxication.

A person seeking an altered state might also become involved in spiritual deception.

But Paul does not treat witchcraft and drunkenness as identical words.

Witchcraft points us toward occult practice and spiritual rebellion.

Drunkenness points us toward intoxication and the loss of sober control.

Then, when Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit, he includes temperance.

Temperance means self-control.

That gives us better questions to ask about a substance.

Why am I using it?

What am I seeking from it?

Am I using it responsibly?

Am I pursuing treatment or escape?

Am I controlling its use or is it controlling me?

Am I seeking a supposed spiritual experience through it?

Does this decision demonstrate wisdom and self-control or bondage and surrender?

Those questions are far more Biblical than declaring that everything inside a pharmacy is witchcraft.

The book of Revelation also uses words from this family.

We find them in Revelation 9:21, Revelation 18:23, Revelation 21:8 and Revelation 22:15.

The King James Bible speaks of sorceries and sorcerers.

The most disputed passage is Revelation 18:23.

It says:

“And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived.”

Some people read that verse and see a prediction of modern pharmaceutical corporations.

They point out that the passage mentions merchants.

It says those merchants were great men of the earth.

It describes all nations being deceived.

It uses a form related to pharmakeia.

Modern pharmaceutical corporations can be wealthy and internationally powerful.

Therefore, they conclude that Revelation 18:23 must be identifying the modern pharmaceutical industry.

We should present that argument fairly.

But we must also identify the unsupported step.

The passage never says physicians.

It never says hospitals.

It never says prescriptions.

It never names vaccines.

It never identifies a modern corporation.

Revelation 18 describes Babylon's larger system.

It is a system of idolatry, luxury, immorality, commercial exploitation, spiritual deception, violence and opposition to God.

The merchants are part of that system.

The kings are part of that system.

The nations are deceived by that system.

Sorcery belongs to that system.

But it is not responsible interpretation to replace the inspired word "sorceries" with the name of a modern industry simply because the words are historically related.

Now let us be equally honest in the other direction.

Pharmaceutical companies are not automatically righteous.

Doctors are not infallible.

Companies can conceal risks.

Research can be manipulated.

Products can be marketed dishonestly.

Benefits can be exaggerated.

Harmful effects can be minimized.

Profit can become more important than patients.

Governments and corporations can misuse power.

Christians are allowed to ask questions.

Christians should ask questions.

Seeking another medical opinion is not a rejection of faith.

Reading the warnings is not rebellion.

Wanting to understand the risks and benefits is not a sin.

But corruption within an industry does not prove that the entire industry is the sorcery of Revelation.

We do not have to choose between blind trust and blanket condemnation.

Biblical discernment requires something more careful.

Now let us ask another question.

If the Bible condemns medical treatment, what does the rest of the Bible say about medicine?

Isaiah chapter 38 records the sickness of King Hezekiah.

God promised to add fifteen years to his life.

Then Isaiah 38:21 says:

“For Isaiah had said, Let them take a lump of figs, and lay it for a plaister upon the boil, and he shall recover.”

God promised the healing.

A physical substance was still applied.

The figs did not replace God.

The treatment did not steal God’s glory.

God remained the healer while a physical means was used.

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10.

The Samaritan found a wounded man.

He did not simply stand at a distance and say, “I will pray for you.”

Prayer would have been appropriate.

But compassion also moved his hands.

Luke 10:34 says:

“And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

He cleaned and treated the wounds with substances available in his time.

He bound the wounds.

He transported the injured man.

He arranged continuing care.

He paid the expense.

Jesus did not present that treatment as sorcery.

He presented it as mercy.

Paul gave Timothy a practical instruction in 1 Timothy 5:23.

“Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.”

Paul recognized a physical problem.

He recommended a physical substance.

He also limited the amount.

He said, “a little wine.”

The instruction contains both treatment and temperance.

Then there is Luke.

Colossians 4:14 says:

“Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you.”

Luke traveled with Paul.

Luke served the gospel.

Luke wrote the Gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts.

Paul continued to identify him as a physician.

He did not call him Luke, the former sorcerer.

He did not say Luke had abandoned an occult profession.

He called him the beloved physician.

It would be very strange for Paul to condemn all medical treatment as witchcraft in Galatians and then affectionately identify one of his closest fellow laborers by his medical profession.

Jesus Himself said in Matthew 9:12:

“They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.”

Jesus was using physical sickness to explain a spiritual truth.

But the comparison works because everyone understood the ordinary function of a physician.

Sick people seek treatment.

Physicians attempt to help them.

The Bible also speaks of balm, ointment and medicine.

Jeremiah asked, “Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?”

Isaiah spoke of wounds being mollified with ointment.

Ezekiel 47:12 says that leaves would be “for medicine.”

Revelation 22:2 speaks of leaves “for the healing of the nations.”

Then the King James Bible gives us an especially interesting word in Exodus 30:25.

God instructed Moses:

“And thou shalt make it an oil of holy ointment, an ointment compound after the art of the apothecary: it shall be an holy anointing oil.”

The ancient role was closer to a compounder or perfumer than the person working behind the counter of a modern pharmacy.

We should not force the modern occupation backward into the passage.

But notice what God commanded.

Physical ingredients were measured.

They were combined.

They were prepared for a particular purpose.

Compounding substances was not inherently occult.

The Bible condemns the sorcerer, but it also recognizes the physician and the compounder.

They cannot all be placed into the same category merely because each may handle a physical substance.

There is also a fascinating ancient Jewish witness.

The book commonly called Sirach or Ecclesiasticus is not part of our accepted Biblical canon.

We will not use it to establish doctrine.

But it is valuable historical evidence because it shows how some Jewish people before the New Testament period thought about physicians and medicine.

Sirach chapter 38 says:

“Honour a physician with the honour due unto him.”

It also says:

“The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them.”

The same chapter encourages prayer, repentance, dependence upon God and respect for the physician.

That is important historical evidence.

Ancient Jewish thought was capable of distinguishing medicinal treatment from forbidden sorcery.

But there are difficult passages that we must not avoid.

Second Chronicles 16:12 says:

“And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians.”

Some people read that verse as a condemnation of doctors.

But notice the wording carefully.

It does not merely say that Asa sought physicians.

It says that he “sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians.”

The problem was not simply that Asa received human help.

The problem was that he replaced dependence upon God with dependence upon human help.

The surrounding chapters make that clear.

Earlier in his life, Asa faced an enormous army.

He had soldiers of his own, but he still cried unto the Lord.

Second Chronicles 14:11 records his prayer:

“LORD, it is nothing with thee to help, whether with many, or with them that have no power: help us, O LORD our God; for we rest on thee.”

Asa had an army and trusted God.

The army was not his god.

God gave the victory.

Later, Asa changed.

When another danger arose, he trusted a foreign alliance instead of the Lord.

When the prophet corrected him, Asa became angry.

He imprisoned the prophet.

He oppressed some of his own people.

Then illness came.

Even in his disease, he still would not seek the Lord.

The physicians were not an isolated problem.

They were the final evidence of a life that had gradually stopped depending upon God.

Earlier, Asa had an army while trusting God.

Later, Asa had physicians while refusing to seek God.

The presence of human help was not the decisive issue.

Trust was.

God does not require us to choose between seeking Him and receiving medical help.

He warns us never to replace Him with the help we receive.

Another difficult passage appears in Mark chapter 5.

A woman had suffered for twelve years.

Mark 5:26 says that she:

“Had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse.”

The Bible is honest.

Medical treatment can fail.

A patient can spend everything and receive no answer.

A treatment can make a condition worse.

Doctors can be mistaken.

Patients can be exhausted physically, emotionally and financially.

We do not honor God by pretending human medicine is perfect.

But the passage does not call the physicians sorcerers.

It reveals the limits of human treatment.

Then it reveals the unlimited authority of Jesus.

The woman touched His garment and was healed.

The physicians were limited.

Jesus was not.

Medicine is limited today too.

Sometimes it helps.

Sometimes it does not.

Sometimes the first treatment fails and another succeeds.

Sometimes a condition can be managed but not cured.

Sometimes every reasonable effort is made and the person still dies.

Our faith cannot rest upon a guaranteed medical outcome.

Our faith must rest upon God.

How, then, should we distinguish medicine, intoxication and sorcery?

Let us consider three categories.

The first is treatment.

A substance may be used responsibly to treat illness, relieve suffering, prevent a known danger or restore ordinary function.

The Biblical concerns in that situation include wisdom, safety, stewardship, honesty, prayer and responsible counsel.

The second category is intoxication or bondage.

A substance may be used for escape, pleasure through loss of control, continuing intoxication or dependency.

The Biblical concerns include sobriety, temperance, self-control and freedom from enslavement.

First Corinthians 6:12 says:

“All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”

Something may have begun as treatment and later become controlling.

A person may begin taking a substance for pain and discover that he can no longer imagine functioning without it.

Another person may use something to quiet anxiety and gradually become dependent upon it in a way that requires careful help.

Those struggles should not be met with shame and slogans.

They should be met with truth, compassion, accountability, pastoral care and qualified medical assistance.

The third category is occult practice.

A substance may be used in an attempt to contact spirits, produce occult visions, cast spells, perform magical rituals, manipulate supernatural powers, poison someone or secretly control another person.

That brings us into the world of sorcery, idolatry and spiritual deception.

The Bible clearly condemns it.

These categories may overlap, but they are not identical.

Anesthesia alters consciousness during surgery.

The patient is not ordinarily receiving anesthesia to summon a spirit.

A medicine may affect mood, alertness, pain perception or mental function.

That effect alone does not make the medication sorcery.

A natural herb may be used in an occult ceremony.

The fact that it grew from the earth does not make the ceremony righteous.

Natural does not automatically mean safe.

Synthetic does not automatically mean sinful.

Hemlock is natural.

Poisonous mushrooms are natural.

Venom is natural.

Ancient sorcerers often used natural substances.

The Biblical distinction cannot simply be “natural is Godly and manufactured is witchcraft.”

Neither does a prescription settle every moral and practical question.

A prescription does not guarantee that a medicine is necessary.

It does not guarantee that it will help every patient.

It does not remove every risk.

It does not make abuse impossible.

It does not prevent a patient from asking questions.

A prescription does not automatically make something wise, and the word pharmakeia does not automatically make it witchcraft.

This is where we need Biblical discernment.

Some Christians may be listening while taking insulin.

Someone may take heart medication.

Someone may be receiving cancer treatment.

Someone may need medication to control seizures.

Someone may take medication for depression or anxiety.

Someone may be recovering from surgery and receiving pain treatment.

You should not carry the fear that every dose is an act of witchcraft because someone showed you a Greek word on social media.

That burden does not come from a careful reading of Scripture.

At the same time, no one should change or discontinue prescribed treatment merely because of a sermon or an internet word study.

Responsible medical decisions should be discussed with an appropriately qualified professional who understands the person's condition and treatment.

We are studying the Bible today.

We are not pretending to diagnose individual medical needs from the pulpit.

There may also be someone listening who knows that a substance has gained control.

You may have begun with a legitimate need.

You may not have intended to become dependent.

But now you are frightened of what happens without it.

You may be hiding how much you take.

You may be obtaining it from more than one source.

You may know that it is damaging your relationships, judgment or health.

Please do not hear only condemnation today.

Hear an invitation to step into the light.

Speak with someone you trust.

Seek pastoral help.

Seek qualified medical help.

Do not attempt to carry the bondage alone.

The fruit of the Spirit includes temperance.

The Holy Spirit does not lead us deeper into secret slavery.

He leads us into truth.

Now we reach the pastoral center of this study.

How can we trust God while using medicine?

The answer is that God has always been able to work through means.

Noah trusted God and still built the ark.

Israel received bread from heaven and still gathered it from the ground.

Hezekiah trusted God and still received the fig poultice.

The Samaritan showed Godly compassion and still bound the wounds.

Timothy served the Lord and still received practical advice concerning his stomach.

Using an ordinary means does not automatically deny the God who provided it.

An old preacher named T. De Witt Talmage told a story about a physician who became overwhelmed by a patient's condition.

The physician went into another room to pray.

A more capable doctor arrived and was told that the first physician was praying.

His response carried a simple truth.

Tell him to come out and help.

He can pray and work at the same time.

That is not a rejection of prayer.

It is a recognition that prayer and responsible action are not enemies.

We can pray before visiting a doctor.

We can ask God for wisdom during the appointment.

We can ask responsible questions.

We can seek another opinion when appropriate.

We can consider risks and benefits.

We can receive treatment while remembering that the doctor is not God.

We can decline a treatment after careful consideration without pretending that every treatment is witchcraft.

We can trust God regardless of the outcome.

Medicine can become an idol.

Anything can become an idol when it receives the trust, obedience and hope that belong to God.

Money can become an idol.

Government can become an idol.

Family can become an idol.

A pastor can become an idol.

Even our own understanding can become an idol.

But the fact that something can become an idol does not mean it is inherently sorcery.

There is pride on both sides of this subject.

One person may say, "I trust science. I do not need God."

Another may say, "I rejected every doctor, so I have greater faith."

Neither statement necessarily honors the Lord.

Faith does not place unquestioning confidence in medicine.

Faith does not reject every available means in order to prove itself.

Faith asks:

“Lord, what is wise?”

“Lord, what is responsible?”

“Lord, what is obedient?”

“Lord, help me trust You whether the treatment succeeds or fails.”

The physician may provide treatment.

The pharmacist may prepare medicine.

The surgeon may repair an injury.

The nurse may provide care.

But every good ability operates inside a world God created.

The medicine can act only within a body God designed.

Human beings can discover only properties God permitted to exist.

Healing ultimately belongs to the Lord.

Psalm 103 says:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases.”

Sometimes God heals through an unmistakable miracle.

Sometimes He heals through the body’s ordinary processes.

Sometimes He uses rest, nourishment, medicine, surgery and human skill.

Sometimes He does not grant the physical healing we ask for in this life.

But He never stops being God.

Our hope is larger than the success or failure of one treatment.

That brings us to the deepest sickness and the greatest Physician.

Jesus said:

“They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.”

He was speaking about sinners.

A medicine may relieve pain.

A treatment may control a disease.

A surgeon may repair an injury.

A prescription may extend a life.

But no earthly medicine can forgive sin.

No physician can reconcile us to God.

No pharmaceutical company can make the heart righteous.

No treatment can prevent physical death forever.

We need healing that no pharmacy can dispense.

Romans 3:23 says:

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Every one of us has been affected by the disease of sin.

Sin is not merely something wrong around us.

Sin is something wrong within us.

We have disobeyed God.

We have trusted ourselves.

We have placed other things before Him.

The wages of sin is death.

But God did not leave us without hope.

Jesus Christ came into this world.

He lived the sinless life we could not live.

He died upon the cross for our sins.

He was buried.

On the third day, He rose again.

The Great Physician did not send us a prescription from a distance.

He came to us.

He took our sin upon Himself.

He paid the price we could not pay.

Ephesians 2:8 and 9 says:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Salvation cannot be purchased.

It cannot be prescribed.

It cannot be earned.

It is received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you have never trusted Christ as your Savior, you can call upon Him today.

You do not need perfect words.

You need honest faith.

You may pray something like this:

“Lord Jesus,
 I know that I am a sinner.
 I believe that You died for my sins.
 I believe that You were buried and rose again.
 I cannot save myself.
 Please forgive me.
 I place my faith in You as my Savior.
 Help me follow You from this day forward.
 Amen.”

Those words do not save because they were repeated.
 Jesus saves the person who genuinely places faith in Him.
 Now let us answer today’s question directly.

Does the Bible call medicine witchcraft?
 No.

The Bible condemns sorcery.
 It condemns occult potions.

It condemns poisoning, deception and attempts to obtain spiritual power apart from God.
 It condemns drunkenness, bondage and the surrender of self-control.

But it does not condemn legitimate medicine merely because modern pharmaceutical words are historically related to the Greek word family that includes pharmakeia.

Do not place unquestioning faith in a pill.

Do not place unquestioning faith in a physician.

Do not place unquestioning faith in a corporation.

But do not place an unbiblical burden upon yourself or another believer by calling legitimate medical care witchcraft.

Seek the Lord.

Pray for wisdom.

Ask responsible questions.

Use appropriate help.

Remember that every true healing ultimately belongs to God.

This week, be careful about the claims you repeat.

When someone presents a Greek word as though it settles everything, open the Bible and read the context.

Ask what the original writer was discussing.

Ask whether the conclusion truly follows from the evidence.

If you know someone who is frightened that receiving medical care makes them unfaithful to God, share this conversation gently.

If you know someone whose life is being controlled by a substance, do not merely win an argument about a Greek word.

Help that person find truth, compassion and responsible assistance.

Bring this conversation into your home.

Talk about it with your family.

Ask one another where trust belongs.

If you have personal questions or concerns, I am available after the service and throughout the week.

You do not have to discuss a sensitive medical or spiritual concern in front of everyone.

We can speak privately.

Please join us at the Reason Together Café.

Coffee stands for Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.

The coffee is free.

The conversations are welcome.

The refills on conversations are always free too.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Your Word.

Thank You that we do not have to be governed by fear.

Thank You for giving wisdom when we ask.

Thank You for physicians, nurses, pharmacists, caregivers and every person who uses knowledge and skill to relieve suffering.

Protect them from error, pride, greed and carelessness.

Give them compassion and wisdom.

Help us never place our ultimate trust in human ability.

Help us also never reject a good means merely to prove that we have faith.

For those facing difficult medical decisions, give clarity and peace.

For those who are suffering, provide comfort and appropriate help.

For those held in chemical bondage, provide courage to step into the light and people who will walk beside them.

Protect us from sorcery, occult deception and every attempt to seek spiritual power apart from You.

Teach us to walk in the Spirit.

Produce in us love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance.

Thank You most of all for Jesus Christ, the Great Physician who heals the deepest sickness of sin.

May our lives honor Him in every decision.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Take what we have discussed today into the coming week.

Do not let this remain a conversation that ended when the sermon ended.

Reason together with someone else.

Open the Bible together.

Listen carefully.

Speak graciously.

And remember that I am available if questions, problems or concerns arise during the week.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

COMMENTARY

**DOES THE BIBLE CALL
MEDICINE WITCHCRAFT?**

An Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary

Galatians 5:16–23 (KJV)

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

**Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.**

Commentary Introduction

The question behind this study is not imaginary. Many Christians have heard that the Greek word pharmakeia, translated “witchcraft” in Galatians 5:20, is the source of the English word pharmacy. Some teachers then move directly from word history to moral judgment: pharmacy comes from pharmakeia, pharmakeia is witchcraft, therefore modern medicine is witchcraft. The first statement contains a real linguistic connection. The final conclusion does not follow.

This commentary works outward from the text. Galatians 5 provides the controlling context. Revelation shows how related forms function in passages about sorcery and deception. Other Biblical texts show that Scripture can speak positively or ordinarily about physicians, remedies and therapeutic care. The result is not a defense of everything done in the name of medicine. It is a defense of careful interpretation.

CONTROLLING PRINCIPLE

The connection is linguistic. The equivalence is not. Word history can raise a question, but context must answer it.

Galatians 5:16–18: The Life Governed by the Spirit

Galatians 5:16

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

Paul begins with a command and a promise. “Walk” describes an ongoing manner of life, not an isolated religious moment. The believer is to live under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit. The promise does not say the desires of the flesh disappear. It says they need not be fulfilled. This establishes the governing issue for everything that follows: what power directs the life?

That question is more precise than asking whether a person has swallowed a substance. A needed treatment can be received in gratitude, wisdom and self-control. A legal substance can be abused in rebellion. A natural product can become an idol. Paul’s categories reach deeper than labels. He examines allegiance, desire and conduct.

Galatians 5:17

For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

The conflict is moral and spiritual. “Flesh” here is not a declaration that the physical body is evil. Paul is describing fallen human nature organized in resistance to God. This distinction matters. If material things were evil merely because they act upon the body, food, wine, oil, bandages and medicine would all be suspect. The problem is not physicality. The problem is rebellion.

Galatians 5:18

But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

To be led by the Spirit is not to be governed by fear, superstition or a new set of man-made taboos. Christian freedom is never permission for the flesh, but neither is it bondage to accusations Scripture does not make. Discernment must remain anchored to what God has actually said.

Galatians 5:19–21: The Works of the Flesh

Galatians 5:19–21

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like...

Paul calls these works “manifest.” They are recognizable expressions of a life resisting God. The list moves through sexual sin, false worship, relational destruction, intoxication and unrestrained revelry. It is representative rather than exhaustive, as the phrase “and such like” makes clear.

“Idolatry, witchcraft”

The placement of “witchcraft” beside idolatry is significant. The Greek noun is *pharmakeia*. In the New Testament it belongs to the world of magical and occult practice. Ancient sorcery could employ potions, poisons or prepared substances, but the presence of a substance did not by itself define the practice. The substance could function as an instrument within a larger act of spiritual deception, ritual power, cursing or manipulation.

The KJV translation “witchcraft” communicates the moral category well. Other translations commonly use “sorcery.” Neither translation says “medicine.” Paul is condemning a work of the flesh associated with forbidden spiritual power. The text does not identify physicians or therapeutic remedies as occult.

EXEGETICAL CENTER

Paul’s concern is not merely what enters the body. His concern is what rules the life.

Pharmakeia and the Danger of Reading English Backward

Pharmakeia belongs to a Greek word family that includes *pharmakon* and related practitioner terms. Across ancient literature the family can refer to a drug, remedy, medicine, poison, potion, charm or one who employs such things. A broad word family does not carry one moral meaning in every sentence. Context narrows the range.

Term	Possible range	Commentary significance
<i>pharmakon</i>	remedy, medicine, drug, poison, potion, charm	The noun has both beneficial and harmful uses in ancient Greek.
<i>pharmakeia</i>	preparation or use of drugs and potions, poisoning, magical arts, sorcery	New Testament settings support the condemnatory sense of sorcery.
<i>pharmakos</i> / <i>pharmakeus</i>	sorcerer, poisoner or practitioner	Related forms identify persons in Revelation.

The modern English words pharmacy, pharmaceutical and pharmacology are historically related to this family. The relationship is worth acknowledging because denying it weakens the study. Yet etymology is not definition. Modern pharmacy is a specialized field concerned with preparing, dispensing and studying medicines. It is not morally defined by every use of its ancient linguistic ancestor.

A familiar comparison may help. The English word dynamite was formed from Greek dynamis, meaning power. That does not turn every New Testament reference to divine power into a reference to explosives. In the same way, a historical connection between pharmakeia and pharmacy does not turn every prescription into sorcery.

The Separate Place of Drunkenness

Paul lists “drunkenness” in verse 21 rather than treating pharmakeia as a word for every intoxicating experience. This does not mean intoxication and ancient occult practice could never overlap. It means the interpreter should not collapse the categories. Pharmakeia is not Paul’s universal label for every substance that changes feeling, perception or bodily function.

The separate warning against drunkenness still gives the church an essential principle. Scripture opposes the surrender of sobriety and self-government. A medicine taken as directed for healing is morally different from a substance used to become intoxicated. A medicine can also be abused. The Biblical assessment must consider purpose, dosage, effect, truthfulness and whether the person is being mastered.

Galatians 5:21b

...they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul’s warning is severe because these are not harmless preferences. The present participle and the character of the list point toward an ongoing practice that marks a life. The church must not soften sorcery into entertainment or romanticize occult experimentation. At the same time, severity does not authorize us to expand the word beyond its context and condemn what Paul did not name.

Galatians 5:22–23: The Fruit That Tests Our Use

Galatians 5:22–23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Paul contrasts the works produced by the flesh with the unified “fruit” produced by the Spirit. The final quality, temperance, means self-control. It provides a sound pastoral test for the use of medicine and other substances. Does this choice support faithful stewardship or encourage loss of control? Is it used honestly or secretly? Is it serving life and responsibility or becoming a master?

The rest of the fruit matters too. Love considers the effect on family and neighbor. Peace refuses panic-driven decisions. Longsuffering endures the slow work of treatment and recovery. Goodness seeks what truly helps. Faith keeps confidence in God rather than transferring ultimate trust to a physician, a pill or an alternative remedy.

A SPIRIT-LED POSTURE

Trust God fully. Ask honest questions. Use legitimate means wisely. Refuse intoxication, bondage, deception and occult power.

Related Forms in Revelation

Revelation contains the remaining New Testament occurrences of this word family in explicitly condemnatory settings. These passages confirm that sorcery is the right category. They do not identify ordinary medicine as the object of condemnation.

Passage	KJV wording	Immediate emphasis
Revelation 9:21	“their sorceries”	Humanity refuses to repent of murder, sorcery, fornication and theft.
Revelation 18:23	“by thy sorceries were all nations deceived”	Babylon deceives the nations within a system of luxury, commerce, immorality and violence.
Revelation 21:8	“sorcerers”	Unrepentant practitioners are excluded from the holy city.
Revelation 22:15	“sorcerers”	Practitioners remain outside in contrast with the redeemed.

Revelation 18:23 and modern pharmaceutical claims

Revelation 18 joins merchants and sorceries in the same chapter, which has encouraged some interpreters to identify Babylon’s merchants with modern pharmaceutical companies. The argument sounds plausible only when the English word pharmacy is allowed to supply details absent from John’s vision.

Babylon is larger than one industry. The chapter condemns a world system of arrogant luxury, exploitative commerce, sexual immorality, idolatry, persecution, bloodshed and spiritual deception. Any corporation may reflect Babylonian values when it deceives or exploits. Pharmaceutical companies are not exempt from that moral scrutiny. Neither are food companies, banks, media companies, governments or churches. Application may be specific, but interpretation must remain faithful to the whole picture.

It is therefore legitimate to condemn dishonest research, hidden risks, predatory pricing, corrupt influence, unsafe products or careless prescribing when the evidence supports those charges. It is not legitimate to say that Revelation 18:23 lexically defines all pharmaceuticals as sorcery or certainly predicts one modern industry.

The Bible Recognizes Physicians and Remedies

If medicine were inherently witchcraft, we would expect Scripture to treat physicians and remedies as inherently occult. It does not. The Bible’s references are not a modern medical handbook, but they establish that material care can be received without spiritual compromise.

Hezekiah’s fig poultice

Isaiah 38:21

For Isaiah had said, Let them take a lump of figs, and lay it for a plaister upon the boil, and he shall recover.

Hezekiah's healing is unquestionably attributed to God. Yet the prophetic instruction includes a material application. Prayer, promise and means are not competitors in the narrative. God may heal through an immediate miracle, through ordinary care or through a combination that remains under His providence.

The Good Samaritan's wound care

Luke 10:34

And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine...

Jesus describes practical care without suspicion. The Samaritan cleans and treats wounds, applies bandages, transports the injured man, secures lodging and pays for continuing care. The parable is about neighbor love, yet the form that love takes includes physical treatment.

Paul's counsel to Timothy

1 Timothy 5:23

Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.

Paul recommends a limited therapeutic use. The word "little" protects the counsel from becoming permission for drunkenness. The same substance can be used differently and judged differently. Purpose and measure matter.

Luke the beloved physician

Colossians 4:14

Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas, greet you.

Paul identifies Luke by his profession and calls him beloved. The verse does not prove that every ancient treatment was effective or wise. It does show that being a physician was not treated as equivalent to being a sorcerer.

Healing images in prophecy

Jeremiah asks whether there is balm in Gilead and whether there is a physician there. Isaiah speaks of wounds softened with ointment. Ezekiel 47:12 describes leaves "for medicine," while Revelation 22:2 speaks of leaves "for the healing of the nations." These images work because medicine and healing are intelligible as positive concepts.

BIBLICAL DISTINCTION

The Bible condemns the sorcerer but recognizes the physician.

Two Difficult Passages

Asa: physicians instead of the Lord

2 Chronicles 16:12

And Asa in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great: yet in his disease he sought not to the LORD, but to the physicians.

The word “but” identifies the contrast. Asa sought physicians rather than the Lord. The surrounding chapters show a pattern. Earlier he trusted God against a vast army. Later he relied on Syria, rejected the prophet who confronted him, imprisoned that prophet and oppressed some of the people. His medical crisis reveals the same hardened independence.

The passage condemns misplaced trust, not the existence of medical care. A physician becomes an idol when human skill is treated as ultimate and God is excluded. The same idolatry can attach to natural remedies, diets, supplements or a person’s refusal to seek care. The object changes while the heart remains self-reliant.

The woman harmed by physicians

Mark 5:25–26

And a certain woman...had suffered many things of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse.

The Gospel does not hide medical failure. The woman suffered, paid dearly and became worse. Her story makes room for believers who have been misdiagnosed, overtreated, financially burdened or physically harmed. Compassion requires that their experience not be dismissed.

Yet Mark does not call the physicians sorcerers. The narrative magnifies Christ when human help has reached its limit. Jesus is the Great Physician because His authority is complete, His compassion is personal and His power reaches where ordinary means cannot.

Medicine, Intoxication, Poison and Occult Practice

The Greek evidence and Biblical theology are best served by distinguishing categories rather than forcing every use into a single label.

Category	Defining concern	Biblical response
Legitimate treatment	Healing, relief, stabilization, prevention or support	Prayer, wisdom, truthful counsel, careful stewardship and informed decisions
Intoxication or bondage	Loss of sobriety, escape, domination or dependency	Temperance, accountability, repentance and practical help
Poisoning or exploitation	Intentional harm, concealment, manipulation or profit without regard for life	Truth, justice, protection of life and love of neighbor
Occult use	Spirits, divination, magical power, ritual visions, cursing or counterfeit revelation	Reject the practice and worship God alone

These categories can overlap. A legitimate medicine may be abused. A harmful substance may be marketed deceptively. An intoxicant may be incorporated into an occult ritual. Overlap does not erase distinctions. The interpreter should identify what the text condemns and what the modern practice actually is.

Natural does not mean holy

The Bible does not divide substances into a holy natural category and an evil synthetic category. Hemlock, venom and poisonous mushrooms are natural. Laboratory refinement is not a moral category. A responsible decision considers purpose, evidence, dosage, risk, effect and whether the practice honors God and protects life.

Prescription does not mean beyond question

Rejecting the pharmacy-as-witchcraft argument does not require blind trust in medicine. Physicians can err. Research can be distorted. Corporations can put profit above people. Patients can misuse prescriptions. Wise believers may ask hard questions, seek another opinion and report harmful effects. What they should not do is transform an etymological resemblance into a universal Biblical prohibition.

BALANCED SENTENCE

A prescription does not automatically make something wise, and the word pharmakeia does not automatically make it witchcraft.

God's Providence and Human Means

Biblical faith does not require passivity. Noah trusted God and built an ark. Israel received manna from heaven and gathered it. Hezekiah received God's promise and accepted the fig poultice. The Good Samaritan showed compassion through practical action. God is free to work apart from means, but He often works through them.

The Christian therefore prays before a medical decision, during treatment and after the result. Prayer is not the last resort after medicine fails. It is the believer's continuing expression of dependence. At the same time, action is not unbelief merely because it involves ordinary skill.

T. De Witt Talmage expressed the union well when he said a believer can "pray and work at the same time." Medicine should never replace God, but receiving medicine does not necessarily reject God.

Pastoral Counsel for the Church

Do not shame believers for receiving legitimate medical treatment when Scripture has not condemned it.

Do not shame those who have suffered medical harm. Listen carefully and help them pursue truthful, qualified counsel.

Do not tell people to stop medication abruptly. Some medicines require supervised changes because withdrawal or destabilization can be dangerous.

Do not treat fear as discernment. Viral claims and word-root memes should be tested by context and evidence.

Do not excuse dependency because a substance is prescribed. Anything that masters the believer requires attention, truth and help.

Do not romanticize occult experimentation. Sorcery remains a work of the flesh even when marketed as wellness, ancient wisdom or spiritual exploration.

Do not make medicine a savior. Physicians are limited, treatments can fail and ultimate hope belongs to God.

The Gospel and the Great Physician

The deepest human sickness is sin. No medicine can reconcile a sinner to God, cleanse guilt or conquer death. Jesus Christ took our sin upon Himself, died in our place and rose again. He calls sinners to repent and believe.

Calling Christ the Great Physician does not demean faithful physicians. It places every earthly healing gift in its proper order. Human care is partial and temporary. Christ's saving work reaches the whole person and ends in resurrection life.

A church that understands this order can pray for miracles, receive ordinary help, question corruption, care for the wounded, resist addiction and reject sorcery without contradiction. Its confidence remains in Christ whether treatment succeeds, fails or is unavailable.

Final Commentary Conclusion

Galatians 5:20 condemns pharmakeia as witchcraft or sorcery within the works of the flesh. Revelation confirms the association with deception and forbidden practice. Neither context teaches that modern pharmacy, pharmacology or legitimate medicine is inherently witchcraft.

The linguistic relationship is real, but the moral equivalence is not. Scripture's wider witness recognizes physicians, remedies and practical care while warning against drunkenness, bondage, poisoning, deception, greed, idolatry and occult power. The Biblical response is disciplined discernment: trust God, test claims, use wisdom, reject sorcery and refuse to turn either medicine or its rejection into an idol.

THE CONCLUSION IN ONE LINE

Trust God fully while using legitimate means wisely, and never confuse careful medicine with forbidden spiritual power.