

# Jesus Versus the Occult

by John Piper

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*The Bible teaches that God's people should not participate in the occult, which involves dealings with the spirit world or supra-normal forces not oriented on Jesus, and instead should rely on faith in Jesus Christ.*

**Scripture:** Leviticus 19:26, Leviticus 20:6, Deuteronomy 18:9, Acts 3:22, Acts 19:18, Galatians 5:20, 1 John 5:4, Revelation 21:8

**Topics:** "Occult Practices", "Christian Faith"

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## Description

John Piper preaches about the dangers of involvement in the occult, emphasizing that God forbids His people from engaging in any practices related to the spirit world or supernatural forces not oriented on Jesus as revealed in the Bible. Piper delves into Deuteronomy 18:9-12, highlighting how these activities are detestable to God, lead to judgment, and are a form of rebellion against God's sovereignty. He explains that seeking knowledge or power through the occult belittles God and exalts man, akin to the ancient Satanic deception in Genesis 3:5. Piper concludes by stressing that the positive Christian alternative to the occult is faith in Jesus Christ, who embodies all of God's revelation and sufficiency, encouraging believers to trust in Him alone.

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## Transcript

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Deuteronomy 18:9-12

JESUS VERSUS THE OCCULT I would like to begin this morning with a definition of the term occult. I designate anything as belonging to the occult that involves dealings with the world of spirits or of supra-normal forces which (dealings) are not oriented on Jesus as he is revealed in the Bible. With this definition I am assuming the reality of a spirit world and of mysterious supra-normal forces. I am assuming that the church makes a grave mistake when it says that supra-natural phenomena are restricted to another age or that only godly people can work miracles. Such a mistake lays the church open to the power of evil precisely because it refuses to recognize the presence of that power. The definition is also intentionally very broad. I mean to include everything from the most blatant Satan worship to the most commonly accepted use of horoscopes. As examples I would mention seances, necromancy, and all forms of communicating with the dead, PSI, ESP, and all forms of supra-natural psychic phenomena, real magic (as opposed to simple sleight-of-hand tricks), fortune telling, the casting of spells, wearing of charms, the use of ouija boards, astrology, etc., etc. What I would like to show this morning is first, that the

Scripture forbids God's people to be involved in these practices, second, why this is so, and third, what our positive alternative should be.

First, let me lay before you the word of God which clearly bans the occult from the life of his people. We begin with the morning text which assembles more terms for the occult than any other single Biblical text, Deuteronomy 18:9-12. Moses addresses the people just before they cross the Jordan River to enter the promised land and drive out the pagan nations. He says,

When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur (that is, an enchanter, one who looks for and uses omens), or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord; and because of these abominable practices the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

Moses mentions eight spiritist activities: divination, soothsaying, augury, sorcery, the use of charms, mediums, wizardry, or necromancy. These are not clearly distinct activities; they overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably. What they have in common is that they all involve efforts to obtain knowledge which is ordinarily hidden, and the means of attaining it is through dealings with the spirit world or with mysterious supra-natural forces.

There is something else these eight activities have in common. The knowledge sought is not out of idle curiosity but out of a desire to exert some power over people or events. This is clearest in the term "charmer" in verse 11. The word means "one who binds a spell." This is the use of psychic or spiritual forces to control another person or the course of events. This is the goal more or less for all the other activities as well.

For example, when the king of Moab sent to Balaam money for divination, as it says in Numbers 22:7, his aim was not merely to find out if Israel was going to conquer his land; his aim was to have Balaam pronounce a curse on Israel by his magic arts. But Balaam says finally in Numbers 23:23, "There is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel." Divination is for the purpose of gaining power over destiny and for controlling people and events to your liking. (But God frustrates it when directed against his people.) So these eight occult activities mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:10,11 are meant to illustrate all those activities by which people deal with the world of spirits or forces in order to get secret knowledge and have power over people and circumstances.

Now what does Moses say about such activities? First, in verse 9 he calls them "abominations." This means that God regards them as detestable, abhorrent, loathsome. It is a very strong word. We will do well to ask ourselves whether some seemingly innocent activity we are engaged in may be an abomination in the eyes of God. Second, according to verse 12 the persons who do such things are an abomination to the Lord. Not merely the activity but also the persons become abominable in God's eyes. It is an unbiblical sentiment which says, "God only hates the sin, never the sinner." When a person gives himself over to will, to delight in, and to follow abominable practices he makes himself abominable in the eyes of God. Of course, this does not put a person beyond the reach of God's love. The glory of divine love is that it reaches out to justify and to sanctify precisely those whom God abominates because of their sin. Third, according to verse 10, activities of the occult are ranked alongside infanticide, the burning of children as sacrifices. This particular sin is probably mentioned in this context because we all feel in our

stomachs that such a thing is loathsome. The point is, then: view charms, horoscopes, ouija boards, fortune telling, magic and PSI with just as much loathing. Fourth, according to verse 12, the Lord dispossesses and destroys those who practice these things. That is, they eventually fall under his judgment, as the nations did who were driven out by Israel because of these abominations. Fifth, according to verse 9, it follows that God would command, "You shall not learn to follow these abominable practices." This is very strong. Not only "Don't do them," but also, "Don't even learn to do them. Don't equip yourself to do them; don't prepare in any way to be a part of them; do not experiment with them." Where the deed is evil every inclination to the deed is evil. This is the heart of my first main point, namely that the Scripture forbids God's people from any participation in the occult. Sixth, according to verse 10, no one who practices these activities is to be allowed to stay among God's people. Both in the Old Testament people of God and in the New Testament church provision was made for excluding from the fellowship persons who willfully continued in abominable practices. Moses impresses on our minds the seriousness of the occult by saying that those who practice it are not to be found among God's people.

Clearly then, from Deuteronomy 18, it is contrary to God's will that his people engage in any activities of the occult. But it may strengthen our admonition if we show that this teaching has a broader base in Scripture than just Deuteronomy. The word "Deuteronomy" means "second law." It is a restatement and expansion of what had been laid down by God at Mount Sinai. So it is no surprise to find in Leviticus commands like these: "You shall not practice augury or soothsaying" (19:26), "Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God" (19:31), "If a person turns to mediums and wizards, playing the harlot after them, I will set my face against that person, and will cut him off from among his people" (20:6).

Later on in the history of Israel among the sins that brought in the judgment of God were activities of the occult. For example, 2 Kings 17:16,17 says that Judah and Israel "forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God ... And they burned their sons and daughters as offerings and used divination and sorcery." The evils of Judah probably reached their worst under king Manasseh. 2 Kings 21:6 says, "He burned his son as an offering and practiced soothsaying and augury and dealt with mediums and wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord provoking him to anger."

Isaiah was one of the prophets God sent to Judah to warn the nation of the coming judgment if it did not turn from its sin to God. You can see his attitude toward omens and divination in 44:24-26:

Thus says the Lord your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: 'I am the Lord who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth--Who was with me?--who frustrates the omens of liars, and makes fools of diviners ... who confirms the word of his servant and performs the counsel of his messengers.'

God frustrates omens and makes fools of diviners, but he confirms the word of his chosen spokesmen. Then in 47:12,13 Isaiah uses biting irony to point out the folly of looking to the occult for help.

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 new moon predict what shall befall you.

Woe to those who dabble in astrology and look for guidance to their horoscope, and strive to know what the day will bring. The judgment of God will fall on such people, as Isaiah says in 2:6,

For thou has rejected thy people, the house of Jacob, because they are full of diviners from the east and of soothsayers like the Philistines.

If we turn to the New Testament we find nothing to change this divine rejection of the occult. On the contrary the rejection is confirmed. For example, in Acts 19:18 the results of Paul's evangelistic endeavor in Ephesus is described like this:

Many of those who were now believers came confessing and pulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all ... So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.

When the word of Christ captures a person's mind and heart all involvement with magical arts goes. It is Jesus versus the occult; you cannot have both. Besides this illustration in Acts, Galatians 5:20 lists sorcery as one of the works of the flesh and Revelation 21:8 lists it along with murder (just like Deuteronomy 18:10) and fornication and idolatry as grounds for condemnation.

Therefore, it seems to me to be a clear teaching of Scripture that God's people should not be involved in any practices of the occult--practices which involve dealings with the world of spirits or supra-normal forces which are not oriented on Jesus as he is revealed in the Bible.

The second thing I want to show from Scripture is why God is so opposed to our participation in the occult. I'll describe what I think the basic reason is and then illustrate it from several texts. God opposes our involvement in the occult because it belittles God and exalts man. Or to put it another way, the occult is simply a continuation of the ancient Satanic deception in Genesis 3:5; "Go beyond what God has appointed and you shall become like God." All forms of the occult present us with a similar temptation: will we act like humble children of the heavenly Father and submit to God's wisdom in limiting our knowledge and power, or will we, like Adam and Eve, hanker for the fruit that can make us "wise" and for the power that belongs to God? Will we belittle God and exalt ourselves or will we humble ourselves and exalt God by being content with his revelation and his use of power on our behalf?

Let's begin again with our text in Deuteronomy 18. In verses 15-19 God promises to raise up a prophet from among the people like Moses. The apostles saw the final and decisive fulfillment of this prophecy in Jesus Christ (Acts 3:22-23). He was the final great prophet like Moses. The point of this prophecy in Deuteronomy 18 is that God has appointed a Revealer of his will and no other medium of revelation should be sought. In verse 14 Moses says, "These nations, which you are about to dispossess, give heed to soothsayers and to diviners." Then in verse 15 he gives God's alternative: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet ... him you shall heed." Then he adds in verse 19, "Whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him." God has appointed for himself a Revealer of that which he desires to be known, and when we turn from or go beyond that Revealer and consult other mediums we belittle God and exalt ourselves. We devalue the revelation of Jesus Christ and take to ourselves the prerogatives of deity. No one who loves Jesus Christ and orients all of his life around the revelation of Jesus can turn to the occult for knowledge or power.

Isaiah shows us in one place how incongruous it is for people who claim to rely on God to seek wisdom in the occult. He says in 8:19, "When they say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,' should not a people consult their God?" It is unthinkable to the prophet Isaiah that a person who knows God and has his teaching and testimony (v. 20) in Scripture should consult mediums. But someone may say, "God has not said enough. God is silent where I need knowledge." So it was with King Saul in 1

Samuel 28. The Lord closed his mouth against Saul and would not answer him about the approaching Philistines. So instead of humbling himself for his earlier disobedience and waiting patiently for the Lord, Saul goes to the witch of Endor and asks her to do what he knows is unlawful--to call up from the dead the spirit of Samuel who will tell him what he shall do (v.15). When the death of Saul is later recounted in 1 Chronicles 10:13f this sin is mentioned:

So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord slew him and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.

Consulting mediums, tea leaves, fortune cookies, horoscopes, crystal balls, palmists or any other oracles beyond God's word is wrong because it belittles God as an inadequate revealer of mysteries. It says that God is either unable or unwilling to tell me all that is good for me to know. Therefore, he lacks the power or the goodness to help me, and so I will take matters into my own hands. Therefore, people who really love God and trust his goodness and depend on his sovereign power shun all practices of the occult.

Earlier in his life Saul had disobeyed the command of God in another situation. God had commanded him to destroy the Amalekites and their spoil. But Saul took the best animals to offer for a sacrifice to God. Samuel approaches Saul with God's rebuke and says,

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of ram. For rebellion is as the sin of divination.

Rebellion is as the sin of divination. That is no accidental comparison. Divination means having dealings with supra-normal spirits or forces to get knowledge and power. And Samuel says that is the same as rebellion against God. Man in the occult is man in rebellion. Whether he realizes it clearly or not he is involved in a seditious effort to throw off the absoluteness of the yoke of God's sovereignty and position himself at a higher level in the government of the universe.

The whole field of the occult is Satan's seed-bed of pride. Every activity offers man the opportunity to shed his finitude and take on the wisdom and power that belongs to God. "Eat this fruit and you will become like God." Simon the magician typifies where the occult is leading. He is described in Acts 8:9-11,

There was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him from the least to the greatest saying, 'This man is that power of God which is called Great.' And they gave heed to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.

No matter how innocent the practices of the occult seem at first, they are all dimensions of the one rebellion that has been underway since the Garden of Eden: the aim to avoid at all costs childlike submission to the limitations and provisions of a sovereign God, and to get instead a power which can be called great. Man in the occult is man in rebellion.

Another way of revealing the evil of involvement in the occult is to say that man in the occult is man in harlotry. Leviticus 20:6 says, "If a person turns to mediums and wizards, playing the harlot after them, I will set my face against that person." Consulting mediums is like committing adultery against God. Jesus Christ is the husband of the church. He is God's fullest revelation. All that we need to know and all the power which it is good for us to have comes through him and his word. When we go after other secret

oracles and psychic powers we say in effect that our husband is unsatisfactory and we must seek for lovers elsewhere. When a Christian peeks at his horoscope he is treating Jesus the same way a husband treats a wife when he peeks at Playboy to provide the titillation he no longer gets from her. Involvement in the occult is wrong because it is spiritual adultery, it is rebellion against the sovereignty of God and it belittles his Revelation while exalting human pride.

Therefore, in conclusion, what is the positive Christian alternative to the occult? The answer is one and the same everywhere in the New Testament: This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Over against all the allurements of the occult stands Jesus Christ, the embodiment of all God's revelation. Faith takes its stand on the sufficiency of this revelation and seeks no other secret knowledge. Faith lays itself open to the power of God through Jesus Christ alone and seeks no other psychic or spiritual power. Faith cleaves to Jesus, loves Jesus, adores Jesus, trusts Jesus, extols the all-sufficiency of Jesus and shuns, in all her many garments, the temptress of the occult.

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