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## Drug Use in Galatians

**T**he first reference to *pharmakia* in the New Testament is the most important reference to drug use in the Bible, and is found in Galatians 5:20. In addition to making it clear that God still considers *pharmakia* to be a sin, Galatians tells us how to stop practicing it.

The fact that God says drug use is a sin is very good news! It is good news because as we have seen, God sets us free from sin as we live in relationship with him. He gives us both the desire and the power to stop sinning and to obey him instead. This means he will set us free from the sin of drug use. It doesn't matter how addicted we may be or what drug we may be hooked on. The omnipotent God who spoke the universe into existence has no trouble freeing those who trust him. Galatians 5:16–25 tells us how he does it, and what we must do to experience it.

In his letter to the churches in Galatia (modern-day Turkey), the apostle Paul describes the inner conflict between the desire to sin and the desire to be faithful to God that all believers experience. He then contrasts some of the changes the Holy Spirit brings into our lives with some of the behaviors that arise out of our fallen, sinful nature. One of the sinful behaviors he refers to is *pharmakia*:

(16) So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (17) For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (18) But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.

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(19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (20) idolatry and witchcraft [pharmakia]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (21) and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

(22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (23) gentleness and self-control. Against such there is no law. (24) Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. (25) Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

—Galatians 5:16–25

The four simple words in verse 16 are the key to ceasing not only the sin of drug use, but all sins: “live by the Spirit.” When we live by the power of the Holy Spirit we don’t do the things our sin nature wants to do because God’s Spirit always leads us toward holiness. Our sin nature (the desire to disobey God that all people have) always pulls us toward sin, but God graciously moves us the other direction.

Most Bibles translate verse 16 as “walk by the Spirit.” The translation “live by the Spirit” is helpful, however, because the Greek word often translated *walk* (*peripateo*) does not refer to physical walking, but rather to a way of living. To live or walk by God’s Spirit is to follow him as a general rule. It describes a life lived in relationship with God.

In verse 17 Paul states that the sinful nature and the Holy Spirit “are in conflict with each other.” Every believer experiences this inner tug-of-war, but those who have been born again have the power to resist sin and obey God. This is why Paul states that when living by the Spirit, “you do not do what you want.” We do not do what *we* want because we can now do what God wants.

In verse 18 Paul wrote, “If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.” To understand this verse we need to understand the larger issue he was addressing in this letter.

### The Curse of the Law

The primary reason Paul wrote this letter was to warn the Christians in Galatia not to try to keep the Old Testament law. Jewish teachers known as “Judaizers” were telling the Christians they needed to get circumcised and obey some parts of the law of Moses. Paul was

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vehemently against this. He had once been a Pharisee (an ultra-strict law-keeper), but he knew God no longer relates to us according to the law.

Earlier in this letter Paul reminded the Galatians that it was their faith in Jesus, not law-keeping, that brought the Spirit into their lives.<sup>1</sup> He then made it clear they could either attempt to keep the law, or live by faith in Jesus, but they couldn't do both:

Take note! I, Paul, tell you that if you get yourselves circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all. Again I testify to every man who gets himself circumcised that he is obligated to keep the entire law. You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace.

—Galatians 5:2–4 HCSB

If the Galatians tried to keep the law, they would be “alienated from Christ.” They would no longer have a relationship with Jesus. It is only through Jesus that we have the Spirit, so if they tried to keep the law they wouldn't have the Spirit either. We just saw in 5:16–17 that believers resist the desire to sin and obey God by the Spirit. Therefore, if the Galatians tried to live according to the law, they would inevitably sin and break it, just as the Jews had done for so long.

Attempting to remain in right relationship with God by keeping the law would result in the loss of their relationship with God and the obedience that is possible through it. Those Christians who had turned away from the new covenant in favor of law-keeping had fallen from the grace of both the forgiveness and obedience that are ours in Jesus.

In verse 3, Paul renounces the idea that the Galatians could be right with God if they kept only some parts of the law, which is what the Judaizers were promoting. Yahweh's covenant with Israel had no place for partial obedience. Anyone who wanted to be righteous in his eyes had to continually keep the whole law with their whole heart, and those who did not were cursed.<sup>2</sup> Paul made this clear earlier in the letter also:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.”

—Galatians 3:10

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In the law, Yahweh promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.<sup>3</sup> The worst curse was the loss of his presence from the temple,<sup>4</sup> but Israel experienced many lesser curses throughout their history. The Jews of Jesus' day were well aware that the Roman occupation of their land was a curse, and as a devout Jew and expert in the law, Paul knew that for this curse to be broken the nation had to return to wholehearted obedience to Yahweh. He was determined to do all he could do to make this happen, including killing and imprisoning those Israelites who worshipped other gods, as the law required.<sup>5</sup>

Paul persecuted the first Christians because he thought Jesus was a false Messiah, but that all changed when he encountered Jesus after his resurrection. When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he realized Jesus is Yahweh's Christ.<sup>6</sup> When he received the Holy Spirit, his heart and mind were changed in accordance with the prophecies regarding the new covenant that he undoubtedly knew, and he understood the law was no longer in effect.

Paul knew his new relationship with God was only possible because Jesus had taken the curse of separation from God and the spiritual death that it results in upon himself, when he allowed himself to be separated from the Father<sup>7</sup> and put to death in our place for our sins.<sup>8</sup> In this same letter Paul wrote:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

—Galatians 3:13

The original and ultimate curse on all mankind—our separation from God because of sin—is broken when we put our faith in Jesus. What magnificent grace!

When Jesus fulfilled the law it was set aside. Now that the new covenant is in effect, no one can be in a relationship with God through the old covenant.<sup>9</sup> The Judaizers did not understand this.

When the law was in effect, sacrifices were made at the temple in Jerusalem to cover the sins of the people every day. These sacrifices were still being offered when Paul wrote to the Galatians, but because the law was no longer in effect, these sacrifices had no effect.<sup>10</sup> They did not bring forgiveness. Thus, anyone who wanted to be right with God through law-keeping after Jesus' resurrection not only had to



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keep the whole law, they had to keep it perfectly! This is humanly impossible. It is something only the Son of God was able to do.

Now that Christ has come, it is impossible to be in right relationship with God by attempting to obey the law. Paul made this clear earlier in the letter also:

We [Jewish Christians] know that no one is justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. And we have believed in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no human being will be justified.

—Galatians 2:15–16 HCSB

The Galatians had a choice to make: try to obey the law and be separated from God and die spiritually, or live by the Spirit through faith and remain in relationship with God forever. In Galatians 5:18 Paul said, “If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.” Now we can see that this too is very good news!

Paul’s teaching regarding the inability of those who rely on the law to overcome their sins applies directly to the situation that many drug users and addicts find themselves in today. Most modern approaches to dealing with drug users are “law” of some sort, whether it is jail, drug court, mandatory drug-abuse treatment, or participation in a recovery program. These approaches to overcoming the sin of *pharmakia* almost always fail. They fail for the same reason the Galatians who were trying to keep the law failed. Living by law does not give the user the power of the Holy Spirit.

Only God’s Spirit can deliver us from the control of our sinful nature, and the only thing required to receive the Holy Spirit is faith in Jesus. Therefore, *faith in Jesus alone is sufficient to deliver anyone from any sin, including drug use.*

This is a truth Christians need to get their heads wrapped around. Even Christian recovery groups have been duped by the modern trend of seeing drug use as something other than a sin, or as something that God is incapable of healing without some outside assistance. This is unbiblical and just plain wrong. The only thing required for complete freedom from the sin of drug use is faith in Jesus. Believers do not require any assistance in overcoming this sin other than the grace and power of almighty God.

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Furthermore, those who are walking by the Spirit do not have to worry about keeping any “law,” because as they live by faith they will do what the law requires. Through faith in Jesus, users and addicts will do what the police, drug courts, recovery programs, and treatment centers want them to do but can’t empower them to do. They will stop using and start living honest, productive lives.

As Paul said:

What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son . . . in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

—Romans 8:3–4

We can meet the requirements of both God’s law and man’s laws if we will live by the Spirit. This is more good news!

Paul also gives us valuable insight into how to live by the Spirit in Galatians 5:18, when he states, “If you are *led by* the Spirit you are not under law.” If we are going to live by the Spirit we must allow him to lead us. Not vice versa.

### A Believer’s Behavior

All believers have the Holy Spirit and obey God, but because our sin nature continues to fight against the Spirit we all disobey God also. Even under the new covenant no one lives a perfect life, but our behavior does reveal if we are obeying the Spirit or our sinful nature.

In 5:19–21, Paul tells the Galatians that those who regularly engage in the sins that he lists are obviously living to please their sin nature. One of the sins he refers to is *pharmakia*:

(19) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; (20) idolatry and witchcraft [*pharmakia*]; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions (21) and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The fifteen sins Paul listed here fall into four main categories: sex, worship, relationships, and alcohol. The first three (sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery) refer to sinful sexual behaviors and to the unrestrained pursuit of sensual pleasure.

The next sins Paul refers to are idolatry and the use of drugs (*pharmakia*). Paul listed these two sins together because they are closely related and often performed together. As we have seen, drugs have been used to contact gods other than the God of the Bible throughout history, and this was common practice in the nations that surrounded ancient Israel. The fact that Paul refers to idolatry and *pharmakia* in this letter indicates that drugs were used in the worship of pagan gods in Asia Minor during the first century as well.

In chapter 5 and 6 we reviewed the Septuagint's references to drug use. Paul was an expert in the law and surely knew of them. He didn't just condemn *pharmakia* out of the blue as he wrote this letter. He understood how drugs are used in pagan worship and witchcraft, and he knew that Yahweh had condemned the practice in the law.\*

The next category of sins in Paul's list are interpersonal ones that the Galatians were probably committing against each other as they wrangled over the divisive teachings of the Judaizers: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy.

The last two sins he names are related to alcohol. In verse 21, he refers to "drunkenness and orgies." The Greek word translated *drunkenness* (*methē*) is more literally "drunken excesses."<sup>11</sup> The picture is one of repeated heavy intoxication. Paul then cites "orgies." Sexual orgies were part of the worship of some pagan gods during Paul's day, but the Greek word translated *orgies* (*kōmos*) is also translated *revelings*, and it may refer to wild drinking parties such as those held in honor of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine.

Paul is grouping related sins together in this passage, and just before he mentions orgies he mentions drunkenness. Therefore, "orgies" most likely refers to drunken group sex in the context of idolatry. The worship of Bacchus was popular at the time and included both drunkenness and group sex. Many Bible scholars have held that Paul was referring to these "Bacchanalia."<sup>12</sup>

Notice that verse 20 refers to *pharmakia* and verse 21 refers to drunkenness. Now that we understand *pharmakia* refers to the use of drugs, we can see that the Bible refers to both drunkenness and drug use. It refers to them separately and specifically. They are both sins, but they are not the same sin.

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\* During the first century AD, the Septuagint was accepted as Holy Scripture and was used by Jews throughout the Mediterranean. Jesus and the apostles, including Paul, quoted the Septuagint more often than they did the Hebrew Old Testament.

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I am not going to address alcohol here, but I will say that the fact that alcohol has been used to contact pagan gods has profound implications. Alcohol has been used the same way that drugs such as opium, marijuana, and psilocybin have. This means that the drug alcohol, when taken in large quantities, can expose a person to demonic influence, just as these drugs can. Support for this assertion can be found in part 6, as several of the symptoms of alcohol abuse are symptoms of demonic influence that are also seen in drug users.

Much of what we will learn about the spiritual effects of drug use applies to alcohol abuse. Thankfully, so does the good news. The gospel is the same for every sinner, and it offers freedom from every sin. The way to deal with the sin of habitual drunkenness is the same way we deal with all sins: live by the Spirit.

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

—2 Corinthians 3:17

Paul ends his list of vices with the phrase “and the like.” This is not an exhaustive list of sins. It is a few of the ones the believers in Galatia were vulnerable to. Nor was he focusing on pharmakia, or any of the other sins listed in this passage. He has the big picture in view. His point is you can tell if a person is living by the Spirit, or by the sinful nature, by what they do.

## Inheriting the Kingdom

At the end of 5:21 Paul states, “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

This is one of those chilling verses in the Bible, and one that we need to approach carefully. Some may jump to the conclusion that this means if we ever commit any of these sins we forfeit our place in God’s kingdom and our eternal life. This is not true. Others may think Paul is not speaking about believers and that it does not apply to Christians. This is wrong. Others hold that Christians who sin in these ways were never genuine believers in the first place. This not true either. We can avoid all these errors by looking at this verse thoughtfully and in the light of several similar passages.

The first thing we should establish is that when Paul refers to the kingdom of God here, he is referring to Messiah’s future reign over the earth. He is not referring to the present reign of God’s Spirit within believers. God is graciously offering the present kingdom to