

The God of the Harvest  
Acts 19:1-20

2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4  
Ephesians 2  
Responsive Psalm 24

This morning I fully intended to finish up chapter 19, but while preparing a bit of a review of the first half I found that there was more to be said, so this morning we will be diving a bit deeper into the first 20 verses of chapter 19. Let us go ahead and read, the first 20 verses of chapter 19. In the first half of the chapter we see the 12 Jewish men, who had a form of belief but did not have the holy spirit. We covered this I think quite extensively over the previous two weeks, so I don't want to spend a lot of time on this again, but I do think that it is one of the most important issues facing the church today. This concept of nominal Christians, that is, those who claim Christ but do not truly believe. Not having the spirit, they are unable to discern sound doctrine and therefore as the scriptures say, "heap up, and surround themselves with false teachers who tickle their ears." Who's ministry is not born out of the word of God, but rather out of an appeal to mankind's will, those who will coddle, and shy away from the truth of the word in a fear of offending. But I contend that offense is a part of the gospel message, for it is truth that calls out mankind's lies, the word of God is a two edged sword that cuts deep to the root of the heart. '

It brings about conviction, it corners you stripping you of all that you have and hold as righteous bringing to the realization that there is indeed no righteousness in you, when confronted with the Holy and Just God, we are in danger of being consumed by the fire of his wrath, for we are sinners, incapable of ourselves in being good enough, or holy enough to meet the standards set forth by God. And as we know this was the major point of the Mosaic Law, that Law which Paul called a ministry of death, for its purpose was to show God's holy requirements, and the simple fact that man can not measure up. Then, in a way of making mankind's position with God even more dire, Christ on the sermon on the mount showed that it is even deeper then the law, for the law is only one part, the outward expression and even in that we are incapable of fulfilling the law, for the reality is that it is the heart, and the inward thoughts and desires that truly show who we are.

God does not merely judge your actions, but he judges the heart from which those actions arise. This is the point that Jesus makes in Matthew 5, verse 20 "For I saw to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you, you will be no means enter into the kingdom of heaven." Even those who look to the law for their righteousness, who do all in their power to uphold it....fail, there is a righteousness of the scribes and pharisee's, an appearance of justification...but it is not enough, and the reason is, because the law is given to convict the heart, not as a standard to which to measure ourselves in our holiness, or our christian walk..but it was given to condemn, to make sin exceedingly sinful, that is expose the sinfulness in our hearts and minds. And Christ teaches that in the following verses, 21, "You have heard it said to those of old, You shall not murder, and who ever murders will be in danger of the judgment." This is one of the 10 commandments, one of the 10 that many even today believe is the staple, and guide for us Christians, many can say.. I have never murdered anyone therefore that counts toward my righteousness, I am not that bad of a person because I haven't murdered anyone....then Christ says, verse 22 "But whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" Oh shoot...so, it isn't just about murder.

Christ goes to the heart of it, to the depth of the matter...and again, verse 27 “You have heard it said to those of old, you shall not commit adultery.” Well, just like murder, that isn't really that difficult of a law to follow.....But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. There is no escaping the our reality of our relationship with God. There is no justifying within ourselves that we are ever good enough, or indeed ever can be good enough. Sin isn't merely what we do, or say...but it first comes from the heart. And though we may be able to control our actions, or our words...it is more difficult to control the heart and mind. If a christian is truly honest, we all recognize that we fail in this regard every day, it is a constant struggle and fight against the flesh, we do fail, we do fall short, but you know what...Christ took all of that upon himself, he has come and fulfilled the righteous requirements of these laws on our behalf. So now all those who are the called according to his purpose, all those who are the seed of Abraham by faith, and the adopted children of God have no condemnation for sin, for it is forgiven and forgotten, just as we talked about a few weeks ago. As far as the east is from the west, which is a way of saying the furthest distance possible, that is how far God has removed our sins from us if we are faithful to confess, and believe upon him for our salvation, and righteousness.

And not only that, he says, that he will remember them no more, so there should be no guilt, or shame in those who are forgiven, for our sins have been paid, and God has forgotten them. I will never forget Vic talking about this subject, and it is why he was always a bit critical of testimony nights in the church. For those who have been around in the baptist churches for awhile I am sure are familiar with this practice...someone comes up, and shares how horrible, evil, and sinful they were before coming to Christ, in an attempt to point to God's salvation. And while in a sense there is nothing wrong with this practice if practiced rightly, but often times it becomes a point of bragging, just like how the law was a point of pride and bragging for the Pharisee's. The point is, God has forgotten it, and in a sense so should you, and move on in the newness of the spirit and life he has given you. Do not hold on to the old baggage, and in the least carry the guilt of sins that God has forgiven you already, and in the worst using it as a humble brag, for it is no longer humbleness but is in danger of becoming a point of pride.

There is a sense where it is healthy, and wise to recall the grace and mercy that God has given, but just like with all other sins which well up in the heart, we must be wary of our motivations, and reasons to be sure that it is God that we are giving all the glory, and not feeding our own self righteous ego. So anyway, my whole point about this, is that righteousness with God is more then what you do, for you can act righteous, and still yet be dead inside. God doesn't judge by outward appearance, but by the heart itself. And, as we all know, the heart is deceitfully wicked above all things, and even those who are saved, still struggle for we are still in this flesh, but the reality is that we are not left to our own devices. God has given us the holy spirit, who works in us to will and to do, he has given us the mind of Christ to think his thoughts after him, it is no longer just us who is operating within us, but Christ himself, working in us conviction when we fall, hope when we doubt, and peace among the turmoil.

So, I was trying to come up with a good transition from this point to the next, but I wasn't able to...so that was point 1, salvation, and righteousness before God belongs to God, and is a gift from God, and we who are his have had his righteousness accounted to us, and our sins paid for, forgiven, and forgotten. And there are many who appear to be of God, but who have not yet truly believed upon him. Therefore we must be faithful in our ministry, not just to the outsiders, but to those inside the church as well in prayerful hopes that God will grant those who are not yet a part of the inheritance; faith, so they may be brothers and sisters bound in love for Christ, and each other.

My second point I wanted to make this morning on the first few verses of Acts 19 which I didn't get to last time we were here, is the effect of Paul's ministry. This is a man who has been imprisoned, beaten, mocked, scorned, stoned and left for dead in practically every city he has come to there is always an uprising against him. But here in these verses we get a feeling of the far reaching aspects of Paul's ministry. Verse 10, says that his ministry in Ephesus continued for 2 years, and all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus Both Jews and Gentiles. And it is this that I want to speak on a bit. I know that there is this pressure that can be put on Christians in ministry to want to see results, to have a fruitful ministry, and this can be a just, and honest desire in seeking the souls of the lost for the sake of Jesus. And it can also be a prideful, boastful sort of thing...but not in all cases. But the reality is, in our ministry both to the world, and even to each other we each serve a role in the kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke of this in John chapter 4, he said "Do you not say, there are four months and then comes the harvest? Behold I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true: one sows and another reaps. I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors" Or Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3, addressing the carnal nature of the body of believers there, who growing with envy, and causing strife among one another causing divisions over who they follow, whether Paul, or Apollos... Paul says, "For when one says, I am of Paul, and another I am of Apollos are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one." This is an important point here, so I will say again... "as the Lord gave to each one." continuing on, Paul writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.

We must not fall trap into measuring success in this ministry in the way that the world measures success. It may very well be that the ministry that God has given you is one of planting...and you may never see the harvest. My coworker was telling me a few weeks ago that his grandma died, and at the funeral she recounted her family line. She had 11 children, 60 some grand kids, and over 100 great grand kids. I thought of the ministry when he told me this, how one who believes shares the hope that is within them, there maybe others who believe and likewise share, so then the faith of the one may God be willing effective in bringing salvation to many. And I think that this is the right way to think upon the ministry, it isn't the short term direct effect that matters as much as the over all far reaching effects. I am reminded of a missionary friend of mine who when doing the arduous task of trying to drum up support from the churches, would struggle because these churches would want to see a return on their investment, they wanted a report of numbers of converts.....there was a sense that money spent in support must equal a certain amount of converts or it was not a successful ministry. But the truth is, we don't know how God will use each and every one of us in this ministry, it is some to plant, some to water, and others to harvest that which they did not labor. One is not more important than another, and all are given by God.

I think of Jim's church in Maryville, It was a college town, and the church attendance would ebb and flow with new college students, who would be there for a few years, and then move on to somewhere else. This did not make Jim's ministry a failure that his church never grew past a certain point, for the reality is that God was using Jim as a planter, one who equipped others to go forth and plant...and one day I believe God will show us all the lives that our ministry has effected.

For Paul continues in his analogy of this ministry continuing in Corinthians chapter 3, verse 9 “For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation and another builds on it, but let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundations can anyone lay than that which is laid which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and straw, each ones work will become clear, for the Day will declare it because it will be revealed by fire and the fire will test each ones work of what sort it is.” Though we may reflect upon our own ministry as a failure, though we may not reach the heights that we desire, though it may seem that God never grants us the harvest...if we build upon the foundation which is laid, which is Jesus Christ, we may not ever see the complete building, but in our contribution each ones work will become clear in the end.

We do not know how God may use us, we may very well be a Jeremiah, warning of the wrath to come to a people who will not hear, but then again, look how God has used Jeremiah, we are still read his words today, and they yet minister to the heart of God's people, thousands of years later the words of Jeremiah are being heard. My point being here is to encourage us, to try to see this ministry through the eyes of the spirit, not of the flesh. To understand that truly it is God who measures the success, and that the ministry of God's word to those around us, God says will never return to him void. The gospel message has power, through the blood of Jesus Christ it is not only able to save souls, but it is the only way, For the scripture says, “For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And who shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things. But they have not all obeyed the gospel, for Isaiah says, Lord who has believed our report? So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Even Isaiah cried out, Lord...no one listens, no one believes...but God answers telling him I have 1000's who have not bowed the knee to Baal, This is not something that we are always granted the knowledge of, this is not something that we always are able to see, but it is not as though your ministry to your family, and to your friends, or even to strangers on the street, or to each other in the church is ineffective, God uses such to his own glory, for his own purpose and it is that which is our focus. I grew up in the church environment, though it may not have been explicitly expressed, it was expected that you would lead people to Christ, by that I mean, it became a law, a requirement and if you didn't show forth converts, if you didn't lead people through the sinners prayer then you were failing as a christian. Now that isn't to say, of course we share the gospel, of course we minister Christ, but we do so not to count numbers, not to add notches in our belt, and not to brag that I lead x amount of people to Christ this week. No, our ministry is in our life, it isn't forced but rather flows out of us, for we merely are to give an account for the hope that is in us.

So, how do these 2 points come together...the church which maybe full of unbelieving people, and the measurement of success of ministry. As you can already see, the numbers of membership, or of attendance to the Sunday service isn't a true measure of success, for there are churches of 1000's who gather week after week, and are greeted with a moral story, and 15 minutes of self help advice...but though they may amass thousands, in the eyes of God that ministry is an abject failure because the focus is upon the flesh, not upon the spirit, not upon God but upon mankind. It is better to be 2 or 3 gathering in faith, lead by the spirit to worship and praise God, then to be 100's or 1000's without the gospel being preached.

The goal of the ministry is not to grow the church in numbers, but rather to share the gospel, to strengthen the saints, to encourage, and exhort one another, to praise and worship God, through the spirit, not by mere actions, but truly from the heart. And may God be pleased that his purpose and plan be fulfilled through us, by the ministry that each and everyone of us has. We do not seek our own glory, and our own success, but merely we seek to do the will of our father, and if that be a ministry like Jeremiahs' to a deaf people who will not hear, then to God be praised for through it is established God's purpose. And likewise if our ministry is like Paul's, far reaching then praise God for his purpose through your ministry being accomplished. The point being here, so that it is God who determines the outcomes, we are merely to be faithful in the message. To be a witness where God has put you, to be faithful to his word. Not out of duty, but out of love toward him, and toward one another. Sharing the hope that you have through him to those around you, and let God do the work of sorting it out. It is he who grants faith, it is he who opens the heart and the mind of his people, and it is he who adds to the church at large, and to the church gathered. Be faithful, be encouraged, for our God, is the God of the harvest, we are but workers in his field. Some to plant, some to water, and some to harvest, and we do so all to the glory of God.