

The Message to Change the World
Acts 19:20-41

Romans 12

1 Corinthians 2

Responsive Jeremiah 10:1-10

This morning we are going to be looking at the last half of chapter 19, which is Luke's account of Paul, finishing up ministry in Asia, showing the impact of Paul's ministry and the rise of Christianity in Ephesus and surrounding areas. In the verses leading up to this section is the account of the power of the Holy Spirit working through Paul to heal those who even came in contact with items once in Paul's possession. Which had made such an impression on the Son's of Sceva, who were Jewish exorcists. Seeing the power of God working through Paul they themselves began to try to cast out demon's by the name of Jesus Christ, but if you remember that didn't go well for them. The demon lept on them, attacked them, ripped their clothes and they fled from the house naked and bleeding. Word of this spread all across Asia, and great fear came upon the people for the power of God has shown that even the demon's obey him, and that he would not be made a mockery, or be held under command of mankind. Jesus was not a power that could be controlled, and this reality is what scared the Ephesians.

This caused many to glorify the name of Jesus, no longer was it spoken of in mocking, and profane use...for they had seen and heard the effect of those who do. This remarkable humiliation of the Jewish exorcists and the consequent glorification of the name of Jesus lead to another amazing event which was that many had come to believe upon Jesus, and made a public expression and repentance. Leading to the burning of spell books and many ending their practice of sorcery and magic. Unlike the Son's of Sceva, these did not come to Jesus to harness his power, to use him and his name for their own ends. They recognized him as the sovereign Lord, the true and powerful God and bowed down and worshiped him, casting aside all that which brought them a sense of power and importance. This as we will see in the subsequent verses this morning, was not merely a setting aside of a hobby, but it was the livelihood of many. The practice of sorcery was a vocation for many, so these who had come to believe upon Jesus, in giving up their practice of such things were giving up their livelihood.

And as we can see this was a very lucrative livelihood, for Luke records that they came together and burned their scrolls, which was valued to fifty-thousand pieces of silver. The burning of these scrolls also shows the full commitment and trust that these who once relied upon this sorcery not only for their vocation but also their own safety and protection against demon's and the like...now fully trusted in God's ability to guard and protect them, they no longer needed to keep these things for in making such a large statement by burning these scrolls, they were proclaiming that they trusted God to provide, both in protection, and in provision. These people recognized that following Jesus, meant letting go of that which they treasured and fully relying upon God. In including this account Luke is giving the message that in the name of Jesus, the faithful shall triumph over the forces of darkness; Christians do not need to fear the devil and his minions, for there is no power in him against Jesus Christ and those who put their faith and trust in him.

Just like everything else we have seen in the book of Acts, each step of the way regardless of the opposition, and In fact sometimes because of the opposition like in this account here in Ephesus, the word of God goes forth mightily, and in power, bringing in countless new believers. Luke's conclusion to this account he says, “ So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.”

The term prevailed is used over Luke's usual term of multiplied here, showing not just the spread and impact of the gospel, but the power and victory to overcome adversity. The word of God prevailed over the practitioners of magic, over the wise men of Ephesus, and over the demon's of hell. Something that their own exorcists could not do, was done merely by coming in contact with Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons mentioned earlier in this chapter.

God doesn't need anything from us, without Paul even doing anything God ordained that people would be healed and demon's cast out by merely coming in contact with items that Paul had worn. It wasn't his words, or even his ministry, or his ability that did this, but it was God and God alone. This is why the name of Jesus was seen to carry so much power, and why the Jewish Exorcists were looking to harness it. It was beyond anything that had ever seen or heard of. But Jesus, is not one to be held to the whims, desires, and ambitions of men... these men had no power, and a lesson was taught through them, that it is God who is in control over all things, yes, even the demonic spirits. AT first glance this account appears to be some sort of magical activity by Paul, and was likely interpreted as such by those witnessing it. But it is God's sovereign role in the process that is highlighted, God healed people in this way graciously accommodating to their own beliefs and expressions to encourage them to draw near and discover what this messenger was proclaiming. As we talked before about the account of miracles in scripture, and the event of Pentecost with those speaking in tongues, all of these things that flow from God have a redemptive meaning and purpose. They are never for the act, or physical outcome alone, but always points to the power of God to save.

Even in this case with Paul here in Ephesus, showing that God was with him, and far more powerful than the pagan God's of which Ephesus was the center of worship for many. And as we read our passage this morning we will see how big of an issue that had become. Let us go ahead and read Acts 19:21-41 which follows directly the events of 11-20, after the demon possessed man beat up and threw out the Jewish Exorcists. (read 21-41)

So here we see the results of Paul's ministry, it has had a rather massive effect in the economics of the city as people were turning away from the pagan god's and following Christ. It was so prevalent that the claim in verse 26 says, "not only in Ephesus, but throughout almost all of Asia." This was a massive movement away from the paganism and the purchasing of trinkets and idols. Demetrius who was leading this charge against Paul and his companions did not take it to the city council, but instead sought to have the people rise up against him. This is likely due to Paul and his companions having not done anything illegal, there would have been no legal precedent to prosecute them, and in fact we see that later in this chapter when the city Clerk addresses the crowd. This would have been the motivation for Demetrius to go this route, knowing full well that he had no grounds to stand on in a legal court, so his only real course of action was to attempt to turn the people against Paul.

We are actually seeing this same thing starting to happen more and more in our own society here in the United States, there was once at least an acknowledgment that Christianity was good for the society, and that those who followed Christ were moral, upright, and productive members of society. But now, there is rhetoric likening those who call themselves Christians to being extremists, Even one of our Senator's recently made the comment that Jesus and his followers are Fascists. Just like with Demetrius there is a push toward demonizing all those who follow Christ, being called unloving, bigoted, and now even fascists. If you don't think that this is a purposeful attempt in creating conflict and persecution then I think you are pretty naive as to what is going on. There truly is a war going on for the American culture, but I am not going to stand here and give you some political speech saying that this is how we fix it. The reality is, our politics ultimately won't fix our societies downfall into paganism and abject rebellion against God, only the gospel can change that.

Much of the problems we are seeing today, I don't think stem entirely from a political problem, but rather the church itself, and Christians for that matter. Having moved away from the gospel, having moved away from the teachings of God and allowed more and more secular ideas to rise up, to be afraid of the controversy of the basics of the faith such as the simple fact that God is sovereign, that God judges sin, and that God is not only a gracious and loving father, but also a wrathful and vengeful God. Our view of God has become skewed, and we no longer see God for God, but have instead made him in our own image, a weak, ineffective, God. The churches who have created and follow this false idea of God, also create weak and ineffective Christians, if they are indeed truly Christians at all. And this has become the problem in our society, Christianity has lost its teeth sort a speak, we have become as Paul warned, a people with itching ears who heap up for themselves teachers to appeal to their own desires and sensitivities. No longer is the God of the bible taught, but rather a God of their own making, and a God of their own choosing. And the realistic outcome of this practice is that these false teachers are creating false believers, who become focused more on the appearance of morality than the spiritual truth of righteousness before God.

Therefore it displays itself in our political system as conservatism, and the focus becomes on the political system, yes, even in our churches there is a major push toward political activism...and now we can begin to see why Christianity is becoming to be demonized in the political sphere... in many ways the church has invited upon itself this persecution, by becoming a political arm of our society. Now of course this isn't saying that we should not be involved, we live in a country where we have the right to be, where we have means to make our voices heard...but rather what I am speaking about this morning is that such politics don't have a place in the church practices, or services themselves. Churches should not be having politicians coming in to stump for their campaign, that is an abandoning of the purpose and role of the church...we gather to worship, to praise, to exhort and comfort one another. The focus should always be upon Christ and what he has done, and not upon the worldly events around us. Talking with Jim last week after the service he brought up a excellent point...that we as Christians must be constantly fed by the gospel, while we are still in this flesh, we are plagued by sin in our bodies, we must be reminded of God and his righteousness, his glory, his grace, and his mercy so that we may stand strong in such hope...even though the world around us seems to be falling apart, knowing and believing just as the patriarchs of old did, that this city is not our city, and this world is not our hope...but instead we look ahead, we hope for a better city, where rust, and decay no longer destroy, and where the glory of God makes our sun look like flickering candle about to go out.

Sadly I would say that the metaphor of a dying flickering candle also would stand for the church today, many have conformed to the world, leaving aside the doctrines of the bible, leaving aside the call and power of the gospel, and have become a dying, flickering candle in this world. And honestly, praise God for that, for in the end they prove futile and ineffective and it is those who stand firm in the word of God, and upon faith that shine forth brightly in this dark world, but shining brightly draws attention both from the darkness of which the light defeats, and from the others who grow jealous and seek to bring you down. I don't know about you all, but it seems to me that when you stand for the truth of the gospel, when you preach a sovereign God, when you determine to not bow to the societal whims and desires and appeal to mankind's felt needs, enemies arise even from within seeking to tear you down.

Our little church is an example of this, how many years have we endured being told that we are a failure because we are so few, and those we had called friends, or even some family played the role of Lot's wife in saying that we should just give up, close our doors because we are a failure and ineffective. Yet, we remain faithful, determined to minister what God has given, no matter who he brings or takes away from our midst.

With a heart focused upon the gospel, and a faith determined to stand on the solid ground of Jesus Christ, he has over the years blessed us immensely, we share a unity and a love that you would be hard pressed to find elsewhere and may God continue to grant such a heart to all those he brings to us. This is the challenge that other churches must stand and face, they must be willing to speak the hard truths of scripture, to teach, to remind, and to exhort their people in the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is only Christ who can effectively change hearts, it is only Christ who effectively changes lives. IF we leave out Christ and his sovereign power in salvation, we have lost our light, we have no power, and we become ineffective and futile in the ministry. Our passage today shows that we will have troubles, and we will have trials within this world but merely being faithful to God. Look at the statement from the city clerk to this riotous mob in verse 35, “And when the City Clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Men of Ephesus, what man is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple guardian of the great goddess Diana, and of the image which fell down from Zeus? Therefore, since these things can not be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rashly. For you have brought these men here who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess.”

Paul and his companions were not on a holy crusade seeking to tear down the temples, defaming and blaspheming the pagan Gods...they merely were there, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and because the gospel is effective in hits power to change hearts and lives they were seen as a threat but not because they themselves were doing anything threatening, just merely standing on the gospel truths, and being a faithful witness, and trouble arose for the gospel is offensive and the light is a threat to those who desire darkness. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are the aroma of death, and to the other the aroma of life leading to life. And who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, as so many peddling the word of God; but as from God, we speak in the sight of God in Christ.” The duality of the gospel, to some it is a sweet smelling aroma, which brings life, and blessings, and hope...to another it is the foul stench of death, exposing the despair, and hopelessness of this world. And even Paul saw it in his day, for many were peddlers of the gospel...that is salesmen, seeking to make the gospel more inviting, treating the church and the gathering as a business has a product to sell which we must make appealing so we don't scare off anyone.

In an attempt of masking the stench of death that world perceives from us by the perfume of conformity to the world, making ourselves appeal to this world's desires we become no different...peddlers of the gospel, when we take off the sharp edges and blunt the sword of God we make it ineffective for it no longer cuts to the heart but only effects the mind. Creating a focus upon the fleshly things, the outward things, and leaving off the spirit. Instead the church should stand as Paul, in sincerity of the gospel, being faithful to the word of God, for we do so in the sight of God and will be held accountable for it. For many who are peddlers, who are seeking their own glory, who are heaping up for themselves followers are in danger of Matthew 7, which I seem to come back to often...but I find to be the scariest few verses in all of the bible. Verse 21, “Not everyone who says to me Lord Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he does the will of my father in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, cast out demons in your name, and done many wonders in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you, depart from me you who practice lawlessness.”

What a sobering thought, that there will be many who will claim the name of Christ, who will walk as those who are his, who will minister, who will preach, but in reality are only self deceived, and deceiving others and are in fact, workers of iniquity, they are like the Itinerant Jews, the Son's of Skeva..they seek to claim the power of Christ, but in the end.. it won't just be a demon who answers back. But God himself who will say to them Who are you? I don't know you? Depart from me for all your so called righteous works are nothing but lawlessness and iniquity. Again this is the effect of straying from the gospel, and not keeping Christ central in belief and practice. Just as we read this morning in 1 Corinthians, Paul did not come with excellent of speech, with persuasive words, but merely with the simplicity of the gospel, as he said, not knowing anything among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. No tricks, no gimmicks, no bate and switch strategies...just simply the gospel message. And likewise in our text this morning, he didn't need to go after the pagan god's, their worship and the temple there in Ephesus...he simply preached the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the effect it had was massive. So then, in conclusion...what is the most effective way to change and effect the world around us? It isn't through political activism, it isn't through clever business models and programs, it isn't through charity, and volunteering...the most effective tool given to Christians is the gospel.

It is only gospel through Jesus Christ that has the power to defeat Satan, it is only the gospel in Jesus Christ that has the true power to change hearts, it is only the gospel message that can bring hope to this dying world. So we are to remain faithful in it, not only is sharing this hope that we have, but also in our own personal lives, resting upon Christ for all things. And it is this which must be our focus, as a church, as individuals, as Christians. We should not be caught up in the things of the flesh, but instead be focused upon the things of the spirit, go forth, preach the word, and by doing so is the only true power to change the world. All other changes, or reforms are temporary...but the gospel is unending, and its effects upon the heart permanent. And the call of the gospel is simple, believe upon Jesus Christ, and him crucified, repent, and believe, having nailed your sin's to the cross paying their cost, and thus establishing you as a new creature, able and willing to follow him. That's it, no fancy tricks, no fancy rituals or practices..just merely believe on him who has accomplished it all for you. Rest in him, who has done the work of reconciliation for you, and those who have been given this gift, will in joy share it, for in it is hope, and life.

My challenge this morning, to those who are in Christ, care less about this world and focus upon him more and more, this world is passing away, fading, and dying, but in him is hope, and life. My challenge this morning to those who have not yet come to him in faith, is the same...care less about this world and seek him, for there is nothing in this world that does not die and is forgotten, Only in Christ can you find everlasting peace, forgiveness of sins, and an eternal comfort and hope. There is no tradition, or ritual, or practice that can accomplish this, only repentance and belief are needed, law everything aside and go to him, for it is only in him that we may find reconciliation with God. So not deceive yourself that you are good enough, do not deceive yourself that you have done enough, or that you even can do enough to satisfy the righteous judgment of this just and holy God. There is nothing in you which can be effective in saving your own soul, for as scripture says, even the faith we have been given to believe comes from God himself, so then even our faith is not our own but a gift given. Pray for faith, cry out to God in repentance, believe upon him the one who promises to remember your sins no more, He is our hope, he is our salvation, and he is our purpose. Let us live like he is, let us be a people determined to show forth the living gospel that is within us, so that we may be a light to this dark and dying world, and that through it all God may be glorified.