

“The Church in Ephesus” October 23, 2022

Last week we looked at a case study of the apostle Paul sharing the gospel with the city of Athens, and we talked about a way to meet people where they are and share the good news of Jesus with them. And I told you that the sermon wasn't about you, it was about other people. And that was nice. Unfortunately, today is about you.

We will be in Acts chapter 19 verse 11...

Now, a little bit of context before we begin, because there's some strange stuff in this story and you need to know why. Ephesus was a very spiritual and religious place. It was the epicenter for worship of Greek and Roman gods...specifically, for the goddess of fertility, Artemis.

I won't go into great detail, but the important thing to note is that the worship of Artemis was a big deal. Worship of Artemis wasn't lackadaisical or casual, but worshippers in this city were devout. Their daily lives, in many respects, were built around the worship of this goddess.

It was also a port-city, which means it wound up being a very diverse and pluralistic place - meaning, lots of other religious beliefs were present and often syncretized with Greco-Roman idol worship. In fact, the purchase of idols and worship of Artemis was one of the chief contributors to its economy. Due to this pluralism, it was also a place that developed a fascination with magic and the occult. Fascination with spirits and the spiritual realm.

And Paul shows up, and like he does everywhere he goes, he starts telling people about Jesus.

[11] And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, [12] so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

So, part of the way God was proving the validity of Paul's message in this hyper-spiritualized and supernaturally obsessed city was by performing a bunch of miraculous signs and wonders through Paul. He was doing things the other gods and idols were not doing - healing people of their diseases, casting out demons, and the like.

And God was displaying such great power through Paul, that even the Kleenexes he carries with him are healing people and driving evil spirits away. It was meant to serve as a proof that this message of Jesus is the truth.

This is where the drama begins...some other people take notice of it and want to capitalize on it in v. 13:

[13] Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims."

Well there is a lot to unpack there. First, evil spirits. I've got to assume at least a handful of you got hung up as soon as evil spirits and exorcisms got mentioned.

Let me say a few quick things without going down the rabbit hole.

-First, for Jesus and the rest of scripture, there is more to this world than meets the eye. There are such things as evil spirits or demons that do great damage to people. In fact, a noticeable portion of his ministry is spent dealing with demonic forces and freeing people from their destruction.

- Second, a lot of what you think about their existence is determined by when and where you live. In some parts of the world, the average person very much believes in and would say they have experience with good and bad spirits. In other parts of the world, including ours, most people, not all but most people, think that sort of stuff is for horror movies and that's about all.

Years ago, Courtney and I were in India and we met with a church planter there. During the conversation, at one point he goes, "Yeah, a few days ago there was a woman who had a demon and every now and then it would throw her down on the ground and she would slither like a snake. She went across the street to the mosque and the imam said, 'Oh, no, ma'am, I'm sorry. I can't do anything about evil spirits. For that you will have to go across the street to the Christian pastor.' So, she came to me and I prayed for her, and Jesus cast the demon out of her." And he said it as nonchalantly as I would tell you that I had Frosted Flakes for breakfast. Courtney and I were staring blankly and it was nothing to him. I don't know if demonic activity is just more overt in other parts of the world. I just know that the experiences of Christians around the world often tend to be a bit different from ours here.

-Lastly, no matter what, something substantive is happening here. People are sick and then are healthy after coming into contact with clothing that has touched Paul. That's not superstition or ignorance. People being sick and unwell and then immediately being healed cannot be dismissed as superstition and lack of understanding. Something legitimate is happening when multiple people are suddenly healthy. God is doing something abnormal and unique here in Ephesus.

I'm taking a second to explain all this because, believe it or not, it's about to get even weirder. Read v. 13 with me again...

[13] Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims."

Religions, including Judaism, developed a means to try to cast these spirits away or make them stop oppressing people. Thus, being an itinerant (or traveling) Jewish exorcist was a job you could have.

Jewish exorcists wouldn't have been followers of Jesus. But, they wanted to help people and keep their job; and, they had heard stories of how demons and evil spirits seemed to be very afraid of and in submission to Jesus. And they start invoking Jesus's name and trying to cast out evil spirits.

And, spoiler alert, it does not go well.

[14] Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. [15] But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"

Snark is one of my love languages, so I'm real fond of this response. "Jesus? We know him. He's a big problem for us. Paul? Heard of him...but, who are you?" I don't dabble too much in the profession of exorcism; but, if the demon calls you out like this...you may want to look elsewhere for employment. Or you need to upgrade your proton blaster. (that's a Ghostbusters reference)

[16] And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

It's the attention to detail for me. Luke doesn't just say they lost the fight. That would be insufficient. He needs us to understand that these gentlemen got beat naked. I don't even understand the physics of this. How do you beat someone up so badly that their clothes come off? I don't know. What I do know is that this demon went to every taekwondo class and never skipped leg day. He was ready. And it is an embarrassing day in the Sceva household. A lot of shame at the family dinner that night. Dad was like, "You had him 7 vs 1 and he beat the clothes off of all you? How did your clothes come off?" This actually lends another dose of credibility to the claim there is a supernatural power at work here. Because 7 vs 1 does not go like this otherwise.

Watch what happens here as a result of this. And if you've ever doubted God's sovereignty, watch how an epic beatdown turns into an awakening in the city of Ephesus.

[17] And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all,

Understandably so!

and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. [18] Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. [19] And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. [20] So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

So, this incident terrified them. Which makes sense, if you saw a demon-possessed man rage out and beat up 7 grown men until they all lost their clothes, it would probably freak you out a little bit, too. So, this city...that's swept up in spirits and magic, is getting confronted with the real power over the universe, Jesus...and they realize that they just might be on the wrong side of this whole battle between good and evil.

And so, some of them who had become believers start confessing and divulging how they had been aligning themselves with the wrong side. They bring everything they own that represents that way of life, they put it in a pile, and burn it in a bonfire.

Ok, who's having flashbacks of burning secular CD's at youth group? Anyone? You should've known the trick. See, if you take your Tupac CD out of the case and replace it with a different CD you don't care about, then bring the case and throw it in the burn pile; everyone thinks you're burning Tupac. So later, you can remember the social acceptance you enjoyed at the burn party while listening to California Love! Win win. I was never gonna burn Tupac, get outta here.

More seriously, if you possess items that are in clear, direct opposition to God, I'm great with burning them. What I'm against, are coercive shame maneuvers on teenagers. I'm not bitter, I'm fine.

Either way, that's not what's happening here. This is a total way of life turnaround. In fact, when it says the value of what they burned amounted to fifty thousand pieces of silver, that's something like \$5 million dollars worth of stuff. This is not a small trashcan fire. They're not burning a few CDs. They're burning up wealth and anything that was associated with their former way of life.

This is a great example of what happens when someone becomes a Christian. It's a depiction of regeneration and repentance.

Scripture uses a handful of different descriptions and images to paint the picture of this. It says that when a person comes to faith, it's like they are born again. It says it's like having a heart of stone replaced with a heart of flesh. It says it's like being blind, but now being able to see. It says it's like getting a new mind.

Ezekiel 36

[26] And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

When someone becomes a Christian, God supernaturally changes them from the inside.

- He opens our minds to help us understand what we previously did not.
- He opens our eyes to help us see what we previously did not.
- He changes our heart so that we want what we previously did not, and we no longer want what we previously wanted.
- He places in us a desire to pursue him and walk away from sin.

Now, of course we remain sinners with competing desires, but our deepest desire will be to obey God. Notice that I did not say our strongest desire will be to obey God. Our deepest desire will be to obey God. It's one of the ways you can self-check whether or not you are actually a Christian. If your deepest desire is not to honor and obey God, then you are not a regenerate Christian. And flowing from our new hearts and new minds with new motivations and new desires...we turn from sin in whatever forms it has taken in our lives and we turn to Jesus, to walk with and follow him. That's repentance. Out of a new preference for God, we go to him, worship him, serve him, obey him.

I'll give you a flawed illustration. When I was a kid, I liked the food at McDonald's. I liked how it tasted. Therefore, I would go there every chance I got. I would request to go to McDonalds and would enjoy it when we did. As I've grown up, my appetite has changed, my tastes have changed, what I like to eat has changed. I now find the food at McDonald's to be gross. I do not enjoy how it tastes. Therefore, I haven't eaten food at McDonald's in years. Because, I don't want to. It no longer tastes good to me. My preferences have changed. Regeneration is having your spiritual taste buds changed so that sin no longer tastes as good as it used to. And repentance flows out of it the same way that I don't go to McDonald's anymore.

That's what is happening in Ephesus. The power of God is so put on display through Paul (and inversely from some guys that aren't walking in the same kind of power) that followers of Jesus bring everything that represents their former way of life, put it in a pile, and destroy it. And quote...

[20]...the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

An awakening happens in Ephesus. A healthy church was planted there, and we read in the book of Ephesians, the letter written to this church, how Paul reminds them of the gospel and instructs them in unity and how to love and serve one another. By all accounts, things are still going really well. They are pretty rock star in the world of New Testament church plants. They are the ones you want to get on video to show at a conference.

Now, turn in your Bibles over to the book of Revelation. The last mention of the church at Ephesus in the Bible comes in Revelation 2. In Revelation 2, a number of years have passed since all of this happened in Acts, and Jesus has some very specific instructions he'd like to give the Ephesian church. Let's take a look at the final instructions they're given. Revelation 2, starting in v. 1:

[1] "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. [2] "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. [3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

It starts out with what's going well: they're enduring, persisting well in the gospel. They don't put up with people saying untrue, unhelpful things about God. They haven't grown weary in all the trials that they have walked through; they are bearing them well for His name's sake. This is starting off really, really good. Very encouraging if you were a member of the church at Ephesus. But then, v. 4:

[4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. [5] Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

So, their church started in an incredible, miraculous way. By all accounts, they were a faithful church through time with normal weaknesses that get encouraged with the gospel. Even now, at the time of when Revelation was written, they have some really admirable things said about them. But, then it ends with a blow.

Jesus says, "But I have this against you...you have lost your first love." You lost it. You lost what started all of this. And he says that unless they repent and regain their first love for him, he's going to remove their lampstand. Which means blow out the candle of their church. So, all of the other stuff that they are doing well, the patient endurance, the theological discernment; it doesn't mean anything if they don't love him. God is not simply looking for people who do things for him. He's not merely wanting to create people who can face hardship in life, or know the Bible backwards and forwards and can spot false teaching...though all of those are good things. What God wants for his church, most of all, is for his people to love him.

And when I say "love," I need to clarify what I mean. When we think of the word "love," we almost always associate it with an emotion. With a feeling. And *sometimes* emotions and feelings do come along with genuine love, but not always.

In our culture, when we use the word "love," we often mean the warm fuzzies that go along with something new and exciting. That's why you'll hear couples that say, "We just fell out of love," but in reality, they just fell out of infatuation. Out of novelty and excitement. But, in the Bible, love isn't so much something you feel as it is something you do. The word used for love means to show preference for something with your actions. So, loving your wife means you show *preference* for her above other women. Loving your kids means you show them *preference* over other things you might do with your time or your energy. Love, in the Bible, often means to show *preference* for something or someone.

Proposal story. Had my friends Jon Ludovina and Chris Kakaras pick Courtney up. She thought I was coming to take her on a date. They took her around to places that were significant to us. 6 or 7 different

spots. And at each one there were people waiting there who were significant to us. And they would share a memory or tell a story. And then they'd go to the next spot. It took hours. It was overkill, if I'm honest. Last stop was an old stone church building that I had gotten access to. That's where I was. I put hundreds of candles everywhere. Flowers and flower petals all over the place. She walked in. I immediately started crying, so she started crying. I was so excited and scared and nervous and happy. Goofiest smile ever stuck on my face. Warm fuzzies and butterflies head to toe.

Now, we've been married for 16 years. I don't remember the last time I bought her flowers. We went on a date recently and there were no butterflies or warm fuzzies to be found. We just sat down at a booth, drained and tired, and basically just went, "Phhhhh."

So, I would ask you: do I love my wife less now than I did back in my glory days in 2005? Maybe, under our silly cultural standards for what constitutes love. But, not according to the Bible, and not according to me. I would very much argue that despite the lack of butterflies and warm fuzzies, I love her MORE today than I did then. Because, for almost 6,000 days in a row I have grown in having a preference for her over anyone else. There is no one on this planet I would rather go eat a quiet, exhausted meal with than her. There is no one I would rather raise our kids with or clean up our constantly messy house with. I know her so much better than I did back then, she knows me so much better, flaws and all; and, over the years we have grown to truly prefer each other. She is genuinely and truly my favorite person.

So, listen: When this passage says they had lost their first love--it doesn't mean they lost their warm fuzzies for God. It doesn't mean that their honeymoon phase should have lasted forever. It means that, over time, they lost their preference for God. It means that, over time, God stopped being their favorite, their preference.

This is what makes Acts 19 so significant. Their love, their preferential disposition for Jesus is on full display. They are willing to throw away other objects of worship, other things they'd built their life and wealth around, and throw away other opportunities for power and prestige...out of preference for Jesus! But, at some point in time, somewhere along the way, that stopped being the case. They'd become indifferent towards Him. Not indifferent towards Truth and the belief that Jesus was the one and only Savior... but towards Him. They'd stopped letting Him disrupt their lives for something greater.

And because of that, Jesus says to them: "Unless you repent and do what you did at first, you're done. I have no desire to have a group of people represent me who will not allow me to impact their life in any significant ways. That type of community is of no value to me." They are very strong, sobering words.

So here's what happens...I've seen it play out time and time again as a pastor. People become Christians and they're all in. "Take the world, but give me Jesus." "Jesus, my career is yours, my bank account is all yours, my schedule is all yours, my relationships are all yours--whatever, I'm all in."

And then a year or two or ten or twenty goes by and you look up and realize, "I'm not sure that my career is going to go how I'd like it to go if I don't cut some biblical corners." "I don't know that I'm going to like my relationship status if I seriously follow Jesus in that area of my life." "I'm not totally sure that my bank account and possessions will be where I want for them to be if I wholeheartedly obey God." And through your actions you reveal that God is not actually your preference.

So, while we've been in here, HOST team has been out front building a fire, and we're gonna throw some things in...just kidding.

But, I do think it's entirely reasonable to ask if there is anything or any area of your life that needs to go in a metaphorical bonfire. Is there anyway in which you are not showing preference to God?

The good news for us is that even if you are in the process of losing your first love for Jesus, if you've realized this morning that you are on a trajectory that you don't want to be on...the same gracious call that Jesus gave the Ephesians he gives to us. He calls us to repent, to prefer him over lesser things, and to once again open our lives up to be disrupted.

And as a community repents of losing their first love, the opposite of the candle being blown out happens. The flame of love for Jesus grows stronger and stronger where others begin to notice it. The gospel spreads, and whole communities can even be disrupted in incredible ways. So, this doesn't just matter for you--it matters for our neighbors, our coworkers, and for the generations that will come after us.