

Gods Made with Hands

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me welcome you to Church of the Advent. My name is Tommy.

If you haven't been with us previously, we've been in a series all summer looking at the book of Acts, and it has just been, at least for me, a wonderful and rich study.

I mean, I've been so blessed by every passage and the opportunity just to spend a lot of time reflecting on it. But this is a wild passage that we come to this morning, and I'm really excited to look at it.

You know, nearly everyone in this city would agree that the world isn't the way that it should be, you know, that there's a lot wrong with this world, that there's things like injustice and poverty and oppression, corruption.

You know, we've all been glued, probably many of us, to what's happening in Afghanistan right now, and just lamenting all of the brokenness and pain in the world and our sense of powerlessness to really do anything about it.

[1 : 04] Nearly everyone believes that we should be doing what we can to try to make the world a better place. We all agree up to that point. I think that's where we begin to disagree. There's a lot of disagreement over how to make the world a better place.

Where should we start? You know, some people want to focus on political change. That's what brings a lot of people to the district if they didn't grow up here. Some people want to focus on things like education and advocacy.

Some people really want to focus on personal development and self-improvement. And what the Bible would say is that all of those things are good.

They're great. But by themselves, they're simply insufficient. The Bible would say that those approaches are helpful, but they're like band-aids for a broken world.

The real issue, what you might think of as the cancer at the heart of the world, is the issue of idolatry. And that's what we've been looking at, and that's what we're going to look at again this morning.

[2 : 09] It's a theme that runs throughout the Bible, and particularly in the book of Acts. As the gospel spreads out across the world, it confronts idols in individuals and in cultures.

So we're going to look at this and how it unfolds in Acts chapter 19 through Paul's ministry in Ephesus, and we're going to see this in three parts. The centrality of religion, the centrality of religion, the problem of idolatry and why it is so pernicious.

And then finally, the power of the gospel. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for your word, and thank you that even as we come to your word with our expectations or our biases, our hopes, our cynicism, Lord, that you come to us with your own agenda, your own plan and desire for the way that you want to use your word in us.

And Lord, may your will prevail as we know it will. May you do your work in us through your word that we would be a people who glorify you, who put your radiance on display for the world to see. We pray this in your son Jesus' name. Amen. So the first thing I want to focus on in this passage is the centrality of religion, and by that I mean the centrality of religion in society, in culture, in human life.

[3 : 38] I realize that when I say that idolatry is the source of all that is wrong in the world, that probably sounds like a massive overstatement to many people, because a lot of people would say, well, I'm sure this kind of thing matters if you're a religious person.

I'm sure this kind of thing matters if you live in a religious or a more traditional culture. But what about if you're a non-religious person? What about if you live in a more secular culture? How can you possibly say that idolatry has anything to do with what's wrong in a society like that?

And that's why I want to look carefully at what's happening in Ephesus. If you walk through the chapter, chapter 19 of the book of Acts, it is filled with conflict and upheaval.

In verse 9, Paul is facing public slander and criticism. In verses 11 through 20, you have a demon-possessed man physically attack and humiliate a group of Jewish exorcists.

I mean, this is an amazing scene in and of itself. There's a reference to God doing extraordinary miracles through Paul so that even handkerchiefs and garments that had touched Paul were healing people.

[4 : 48] By the way, that does not give us license to sell pieces of cloth to you so that you can go home and do miracles with them. This is not meant to be a normative practice in the church.

It's meant to illustrate this is the kind of thing that was happening. It was extraordinary. It was not normative. In other words, there was a massive spiritual conflict underway. The power of God was so evident that this kind of thing was happening.

It was extraordinary even for them. We have people burning books in the streets. We have in verses 21 to 41 a riot breaking out and things almost getting out of hand.

So filled with conflict and upheaval, and we need to ask, why is all of this happening? I mean, Ephesus is just sort of being turned upside down here. It is a ripple effect of Paul's ministry.

In verse 26, it says, not only in Ephesus, this is Demetrius talking about Paul, not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

[6 : 01] The more Paul said that, and the more people believed it, the more it turned the entire society upside down. That was the core of his ministry. And of course, we're talking here about idols.

Gods made with human hands. Gods that are not gods. False gods. Things that we create and then worship in the place of God. And the more Paul confronts idolatry, the more he disrupts culture and society.

And you say, well, why? Why would this not just affect the religious people who worship those particular idols? And we would say, well, this gives us a clue into how culture works.

If you've been around Advent, you've heard this before, but I think we just need to hear it again and again. The word culture comes from two root words. The word cultus, which means religious worship, and the word kolere, which means to cultivate or to plow or till or make something out of the world, right?

And you take those two words together, religious devotion and making things out of the world, hold those together and you get a sense of what culture is. You have something at the very center of society or a collection of things.

[7 : 16] And that society agrees that these are the most important things. These are the ideals and the values that we most cherish and worship. They're the ultimate things. That sits at the center.

And then everything flows out of that. Everything that we build, everything that we make, everything that we create reflects that, right? So in Paul's world, those central things might be things like family and honor and fertility and glory and agriculture, right?

Made sense for the kind of world they lived in. What might it look like in our world? Comfort, right? Achievement, depending on where you're from. Football, freedom, status, right?

These are the things that sit at the center of society. We all agree. We all want that. And then everything, our institutions, our beliefs, our behaviors, our values, our art, our politics, our economics, all of that flows out of those central values.

And whatever sits at the center, that's our idol. Those are our gods made with human hands. So in the words of Henry Van Til, culture is religion externalized. It's religion externalized.

[8 : 29] This is a very important point. It's a very important point because a lot of people in the modern West think of religion as merely one aspect of culture, right?

You have your sort of culture. And then maybe over here you have your public institutions. And here you have your values and your norms. And here you have your economy. And here you have your politics.

And then kind of down here you have your religion, right? And it's just a kind of peripheral aspect of culture. And so we think that some cultures are more religious.

You know, that religion piece is bigger in some cultures. And in other cultures they're more secular. And so that religion piece is sort of further off to the side. And a lot of people see that in our culture.

They say, well, in the postmodern West or in the late modern West, depending on how you want to say it. You know, religion is getting smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller. There's atrophy happening here. And so it's less and less important.

[9 : 25] Right? That's how we like to see it. But the truth is, I think what the Bible would say is that religion is not just one aspect of culture over here. Religion sits at the very center of all cultures and all societies.

All of culture is religious because it's the externalization of whatever it is we worship at the center. Right?

And I think, by the way, I think that we are having to learn this the hard way. We, and by we, I mean we in the West and the United States, as we look at what's happening in Afghanistan. You know, there's a lot we could say about it, and I don't want to oversimplify it, but it strikes me again and again and again as I watch the news every day.

We thought that we could go in with our money and our power and our ideals, and that a liberal democracy with universal human rights and equality would just naturally emerge. That it would just naturally happen, because anybody with common sense would want that.

And I think that we underestimate the fact that our entire culture has, that their entire culture has grown out of Islam. And our entire culture has grown out of Christianity and Judaism.

[10 : 38] You know, Jürgen Habermas says, universalistic egalitarianism from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life and solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, democracy.

He says all of that is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. Right? Listen, now, I'm not saying that our culture is perfect. Far from it.

And we're going to get into that in just a little while. But here's the point I'm wanting to make about culture. If culture is the fruit, religion is the root.

Religious devotion is the root of every culture. You can't have the fruit of a tree without having the roots of that tree. I look at the Middle East and all of the efforts to try to establish, you know, the kind of society and culture that we have here over there, and it's like expecting an orange tree to produce apples just by calling it an apple tree.

And it's not that simple. Because religious devotion sits at the very heart of culture and society. Only by beginning to change those central objects of worship can you begin to meaningfully and in a lasting way shift and change a culture.

[11 : 58] Right? So that's the first point. The centrality of religion. It's not out here. It's at the very heart of every culture and society. Even if they claim to be a secular society, there's always something that is worshipped and upheld as ultimate.

Now, the second thing we want to look at here is the problem of idolatry. If that is true, what I just said about culture, that begins to help us understand why idols could be such a big deal.

The first problem that we have with idolatry that we see in Ephesus is that idolatry permeates the culture. It permeates the culture. You know, you drop a teabag in some hot water, and in a few minutes that tea has infused everything.

That's what an idol does. It infuses every nook, cranny, and crevice of the culture. So you can't just go into a culture, replace the idol, and expect everything to go smoothly.

Oh, don't care about this anymore. Care about this now. Paul is traveling throughout the region, and he's confronting the idols at the center of this culture, and a riot breaks out.

[13 : 02] I mean, in response to what Paul's doing, people gather in the streets, and for hours they shout, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!

And you say, what's that about? Idolatry permeated the culture. And idolatry, the things that they worshipped at the center, represented in Artemis of the Ephesians.

You know, Artemis, the goddess of childbirth and fertility, these are things that were very central in their society. Idolatry permeated the culture, and so it was wrapped up in all of the economic, and political, and cultural activity in the city.

In other words, there's nothing that you could do in that society that wasn't in some way connected to the idolatry. It was all infused with it. So if you just look at society there, the selling of images, both of the false gods and their temples, that's what Demetrius did.

Shrines to Artemis. They're little figures of Artemis, made out of silver, or little images of Artemis' temple. The selling of things like that had made people like Demetrius extremely wealthy.

[14 : 14] Entire industries of craftsmen had grown up around that. Cult prostitution, often involving minors, brought in huge sums of money to the temples.

Cult prostitution involving minors, huge amounts of money came in through that to keep the temples wealthy. There were many civic and public events that included, as just part of the liturgy, a dedication sacrifice to one of the gods or goddesses.

And then later, as emperor worship became more and more normative and expected, you would have a dedication sacrifice to the emperor, who was seen as God.

A lot of the meat that you would go buy in the marketplace came from pieces of meat that were left over after other parts of that animal had been sacrificed. So you had most of the meat, the more available, affordable meat, was from meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

And because of all of these things, Ephesus had become the financial center of the Roman Empire. Right? So again, I think, you know, we in the secular progressive West like to think of religion as a secondary add-on, as something very peripheral, but what we see here is the opposite.

[15 : 32] What you've got to understand is, as Paul confronts the idols of this culture, he is confronting their entire way of life. All civic life, politics, economics, everything was bound up in idolatry.

So Paul and his message represent an existential threat to the Ephesian way of life. You challenge the idols of a culture, you challenge the very integrity of that culture, and you will get pushback.

So we say, okay, well, what does this look like in our culture? We can't imagine, you know, shouting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians in the middle of the streets. Most of us don't do that on the weekends.

And we say, well, just because our culture grew out of Judaism and Christianity, does that mean that we're immune from this kind of thing? Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

So then we have to ask, well, what gods do we make with our hands? You know, and I think maybe one of the quintessentially kind of Western American U.S. gods would be the god of freedom.

[16 : 40] Right? Freedom, which is very core to our identity. It's very core to who we are. People on the left and the right, we all agree on the value of freedom, although I think we tend to define it in different ways.

Right? Freedom is a very good thing. I'm very pro-freedom, but I also believe that we've turned freedom into a god that we have made with our hands. You know, you have people on the right, politically and socially, who complain about all of the progressives who feel free to redefine things like marriage or gender identity.

And they say, you're not free to do that. You're not free to make that kind of call. And then you have people on the left who complain about conservatives who do things like adamantly refusing to wear masks under any circumstances.

And they say, your personal freedom shouldn't put other people at risk. And so we have this happening on both sides, but it's all the same god that we are worshipping, the god of personal freedom.

And if you were to go in and challenge that kind of thing on the left or challenge that kind of thing on the right, you would represent an existential threat because people feel like you are threatening their very freedom.

[17 : 49] If you were to challenge those things. And so you would hear the same response from both sides. How dare you impinge on my personal freedom? My body, my choice.

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. We don't say that, but we have different ways of saying the same thing. Don't challenge this ultimate value.

How dare you? Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. And if you think about our culture writ large, right, that's just one example. Freedom is one example. But think about the role that comfort plays in our culture.

Or sex. Or status. Or expressive hyper-individualism. Or outrage. Or achievement. Right? And then, so think about those things.

And then think about our politics. Think about our institutions. Think about our economy. Think about our way of life. And try to make the connections. Right?

[18 : 48] How much of our political life is driven by fear-mongering? And people's idolatrous desire for safety. You know, we've said before, if you as a politician can define the problem that makes people feel threatened and then define an enemy.

And then make the promise that you're going to do whatever necessary to overcome that enemy and keep people safe. They will vote for you because people want to be safe. Think about the outrage industrial complex online and how much ad revenue is generated through clicking. Because we crave outrage in a weird kind of way. Think about the porn industry or the sex trafficking industry driven by our idol of sexual gratification. Right?

This is happening in the ancient world through cult prostitution. It's happening today. It's always been there. We just have different names for the same thing. Think about all of the economic injustice and environmental degradation that results from the idol of overconsumption.

Think about all the money spent on premium brands. All the school debt racked up because of the idol of status. Right? Think about all of the hours that we work.

[20 : 02] Think about the friendships that we neglect. The families that we neglect because of the idols of productivity and success. Because you know if you don't put in the hours over the weekend to get that thing done, there's a hundred other people who would love your job.

You know, we could keep going all day, but the point I hope is clear by now. Idolatry permeates our culture. Just like it permeated the ancient world. We call ourselves a secular society increasingly. But we're not. Right? We're just... What we're doing is we're deciding that we no longer want to use religious language. But we're every bit as religious.

We just have different words for it. So that's the first problem is that idolatry permeates the culture. The second problem is even arguably worse.

That idolatry represents spiritual evil. A lot of times, and I'm very guilty of this, when we talk about idolatry, we can talk about it in very intellectual, sociological kinds of ways.

[21 : 04] And I think we do ourselves a great disservice by not remembering regularly that idolatry represents actual spiritual evil. Right? Not only does Paul face intellectual opposition, political opposition, economic, social opposition, he faces demonic opposition.

And we should not make the mistake, we should never make the mistake of reading the Bible and saying, oh, well, we'll take into account the political or the economic stuff, but the demonic, we just sort of, we're not going to think about that.

We do ourselves a great disservice by doing that. Because this is what sits behind it all. Idols are not spiritually neutral. Right? It can start out as a good thing, something that God made, because that's the nature of evil.

Evil isn't generative. It can't create. What evil can do is twist and distort. And so we can take something that is good, that God gave us, that God made for our enjoyment, and we can begin to imbue it with a significance that it was never meant to have.

We begin to lift it up above God. And when that happens, when that happens, it begins to accumulate a kind of spiritual power, a kind of malevolent force that stands opposed to God and his creation.

[22 : 14] And it's a power that seeks to destroy everything that God has made. So when you take something like freedom or status, those are nothing more than ideas.

Those are constructs. Right? They don't actually exist physically. But you take something like freedom or status and you worship it. When you turn it into an ultimate thing, a thing that you can't live without, it takes on a spiritual power in your life.

And that power is destructive. So, you know, we talked about this already. Freedom becomes a destructive force that begins to break down communities by pitting people against each other as everyone obsesses over their rights.

Status becomes a destructive force that breeds envy and resentment and shame and inferiority and snobbery.

Right? And in the West, we typically think of things like this in psychological or sociological terms. We don't think of things like this as demonic. We are wrong.

[23 : 20] We are wrong. We are wrong. We are absurdly naive not to recognize the form that spiritual attack most often takes in our society.

And it is people spending money they don't have so that they can look down their noses at people who don't have that money to spend. So that they can have the brand name thing rather than the

generic thing.

So that they can have a certain degree or a certain kind of car or a certain kind of job that tells the world there is somebody rather than a nobody. And having an economy driven by that kind of thinking.

That's spiritual attack. That is not of the Lord. That is satanic. And we need to recognize that. Right? So here's where we are so far.

Religion is the root of all culture. It sits underneath every culture and society. And the religion under every culture and society, including ours, involves idol worship.

[24 : 21] Which is worshiping gods that we have made with our own hands. And then idols represent spiritual evil. Destructive malevolence seeking to tear down everything that God has made.

And our entire culture is defined by idols. And if that is true, what does that mean? It means there is no neutral ground. It means there is no opt-out.

It means you can't say, I'm going to be an irreligious person. Because the entire culture that you live in conspires to keep you enthralled to idols. Everywhere you go, everything that you do, every institution you engage with, it all conspires to keep you enthralled to idols.

Because it flows out of idol worship. And so it takes something tremendously powerful to set people free. Tremendously powerful. The power of the gospel.

Our final point. Despite everything that we just said, all throughout Ephesus and the surrounding region, people are being set free in droves.

[25 : 29] And so many people are being transformed by the gospel that it begins to impact patterns of consumption and destabilize the economy. How incredible is that?

You have so many people repenting of their idols and following Jesus that the economy begins to wobble. Right? There's cracks in the foundations. And this is because of three things if you look at Paul's ministry.

The first thing that's happening, it says in the text, is that the name of Jesus is being extolled. The essence of Paul's message was this. The God made with hands are not God's.

They're empty. They're worthless. They're powerless. They can never deliver on their promises. And so the more you worship them, the more you're going to give to them, and they're never going to have anything back to you.

And you're going to live your life as a slave. And so Paul would say, but Jesus Christ has come. He's the only one who you can worship who will set you free. He's proven his desire for you to be free by giving his life for you on the cross to set you free from sin and death.

[26 : 37] He wants you to be free. And so Paul would announce that good news, but here's the thing. In order to be free, you can't just invoke the name of Jesus like a magic charm.

That's what those Jewish exorcists did. And you see how that turned out. Right? My friend used to say he got beaten like a rented goalie.

And I think about that every time I see this. I don't even exactly know what that means. Maybe it's a sports analogy, but I always think of that line when I see this text. This dude gets rocked. All of them get beaten, stripped naked, and sent out into the street humiliated.

And it's meant to show us something. If you just think that you can invoke the name of Jesus like a magic charm, like you're at middle school Christian summer camp, and you're around the fire, and they do the altar call, and you say, yeah, I give my life to Jesus.

And then that's it. And then you just go on living your life like nothing has changed. You know, your idols are going to beat you and humiliate you in your life. You're going to be sent out in the street, stripped of everything that means anything to you.

[27 : 45] Right? A thrall. You know, it's not just a magic charm. Right? Jesus' name has to be extolled in your life. That means it has to be given the place of greatest prominence.

That you have to praise it above all other names. It means Jesus has to take the throne of your life. The only way to be free from idols is if Jesus displaces them and takes the throne of your life. His name has to be extolled. The next thing that we see is the word of God is being proclaimed, and it's being taught, and it's being... They're making sure that people understand it so that they can live by it.

It says in verse 20, the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. Look at the passage and just ask these questions. Why is it necessary at the end of chapter 18 for Priscilla and

Aquila to correct Apollos to make sure his teaching of God's word was accurate? Right? He's this great orator, but they're like, his theology's off. He's good on the Old Testament. He needs some adjustment when it comes to the New Testament. So it's noteworthy, by the way, that Priscilla is mentioned before Aquila, so she probably took the lead in this.

[28 : 51] Hey, Apollos, we need to correct your theology so that you're teaching accurately. Why would that matter? Why would Paul spend two years, as it says in verse 10, making sure that all the residents of Asia hear the word of God?

Why not just write down the number of conversions and send it back to Jerusalem? You know, we got 1,372 conversions in Ephesus, and I'm going on, right?

He stays there for two years, teaching the word of God to them. Why do many of the new believers pile up their occult pagan books and burn them in the street?

This is not prescriptive. We shouldn't force people to burn books. They do this of their own accord. They want to. Why? Why have they suddenly devalued their own words so highly or so lowly?

Why are Paul's last words to the leaders in the church at Ephesus, and this is in chapter 20, right? His last words, he's never going to see them again. He thinks he's going to his death, and he basically says two things.

[29 : 51] Teach the word of God, and then guard it. Make sure nobody comes in to distort the teaching of the word of God. It's the only thing he basically says. The reason that all of these things are true is this.

It's because the way of God's word is the way of freedom. Do you want to know what a life lived in total freedom looks like? What does a free human being look like?

Well, it's a life lived out in complete obedience to God's word. And you say, well, what does that entail in a nutshell? Somebody asked Jesus that. Well, could you just kind of summarize that? What does that actually mean?

And Jesus says it's a person who loves God. It's a person who loves God with all of her heart, all of her soul, and all of her mind. And it's a person who loves her neighbor as herself.

That's it. That's a free human being. That's a summary of the word. If you want to know what your idols are, if you want to know kind of what does this look like in my life, start reading.

[30 : 54] I was talking to David just before the service, and he was just talking about, sorry to put you on the spot, David, but he was talking about just this experience that he and a group of people have had reading through God's word, reading through the Bible in a year together.

And it's something that I would actually love to see our whole church commit to doing this year. So maybe we'll be able to do that. But if you start reading Scripture regularly and you start trying to put into practice the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, it is not going to take very long for you to come to a place in Scripture that you find offensive, that you find challenging, that you find bewildering.

You will get to entire pages, entire chapters, that you just want to skip. And that's one of the beauties of doing a reading plan, is you can't skip it. But that's what we need.

We need to read through God's word and get to a place where we're reading and reading and reading, and all of a sudden we're like, oh, mmm, you know, and you start to feel that sense of offense rising up in you. That is your idle detector beeping.

And you need to dig in and figure out, why do I not want to read this? Why am I being troubled by this? I guarantee you, if you follow that thread, you will find something that is robbing you of the ability either to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, or to love your neighbor as yourself.

[32 : 14] Right? So this is the second thing. The word of God is being, so Jesus' name is being extolled. The word of God is being proclaimed. The third and final thing, the body of Christ is being built up. Paul's not just teaching.

He's not just preaching. He's not just instructing. He is baptizing as he goes. And he's making sure that people are baptized, not just with the baptism of John. This is at the beginning of the chapter.

But in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that they receive the Holy Spirit.

And he's grafting people into the church. And before he leaves, he makes sure that there are godly leaders in place to continue caring for the flock in Ephesus. And this is the same pattern that he follows everywhere he goes.

So this is not just about making converts. It's about starting churches. If your entire society and culture has grown out of idol worship, and if your entire culture is infused with idolatry, when you begin to live a life out of step with that, you will meet massive opposition.

You cannot do it alone. You need a countercultural community of people around you to make that kind of life possible over the long haul. Otherwise, you may not become an unbeliever.

[33 : 29] Arguably, you'll become something worse. Nominal. Lukewarm. The kind of person that Jesus talks about spitting out of his mouth in Revelation, right?

So you need a community around you so that you can live counterculturally and thus keep your freedom. So I want to pull all this together. We're out of time. Do you want to be part of making the world a better place?

I assume you do. Start by getting freedom from the idols in your own life. That is where you start. Give yourself to Jesus.

Devote yourself to his word. And commit yourself to his church. And then, I would love to imagine this kind of thing happening in D.C.

Right? Imagine so many people in D.C. lowering their consumption so that they can give more money away. Imagine so many people replacing outrage with grace and forgiveness.

[34 : 33] Imagine so many people refusing to work on the Sabbath, refusing to work when they're with their friends or family. Imagine so many people spending less time on their devices and more time talking to their neighbors.

Imagining this happening on such a scale that it actually begins to reshape the economy, that it begins to reshape the politics, that it begins to reshape the culture. That is a beautiful vision, in my opinion.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that it sets us free. I thank you that you're the kind of God who desires freedom for your people. You desire for us to be free, to walk in the open air, to feel your light on our faces.

Lord, people who have been set free to love you with everything we have, people who have been set free to give ourselves to loving one another with everything we have. Lord, I pray that we would, that all of your people in this city would embrace that freedom.

And that, Lord, as your free people live that freedom out, I would love, Lord, how magnificent would it be for this culture to have to adjust to that new reality of the mass presence of spiritually free people living out their freedom for your glory.

[35 : 57] It's in your son's name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.