

# Christians Are Not The Lawless Ones

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Preacher: Pastor Cal Morrison

[ 0 : 00 ] So, this morning we're in Acts chapter 19. We're going to close the chapter. We're doing the last part of the chapter from verse 21 to 41. I'm going to read that and then...

Okay, Acts chapter 19, verse 21. This is talking about when the people had brought their magic books and they burned them all.

And Luke writes, Now, after these events, Paul resolved in his spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

And I've been sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus. He himself stayed in Asia for a while. About that time, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way.

For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together with the workmen in similar trades and said, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.

[ 1 : 38 ] And you see here that not only in Ephesus, but almost in all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.

And there's a danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.

When they'd heard this, they were enraged and were crying out, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! So the city was filled with confusion.

And they rushed together into the theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him.

Even some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion and most of them did not know why they had come together.

[ 3 : 02 ] Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward, and Alexander, motioning with his hands, wanted to make a defence to the crowd. But, when they recognised that he was a Jew, for about two hours, they all cried out with one voice, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?

Who doesn't know that? Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemous of our goddess.

If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open and there are proconsuls, let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.

For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there's no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.

[ 4 : 22 ] When he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. Amen. And this is the word of the Lord, and we pray that he blesses the reading of it. Do you know why you are assembled here today?

Do you know? Of all the different kinds of meetings that you could be called out to, whether it's a committee somewhere or a council meeting somewhere else or a neighbourhood assembly, why do you come out to this assembly on this day?

Unlike much of Acts, our passage this morning focuses less on what the Christians are doing and more on what the townsfolk are doing. The interesting thing is, the three times in Acts chapter 19 that Luke uses the word church, which is the Greek word *ecclesia*, the three times that he uses it, he is using it not to refer to the assembly of Christians, but to the assembly of Ephesian citizens, secular assembly.

Out of all the times that the word *ecclesia* is used in the entire New Testament, only here is it used of for an assembly other than the gathered Christians or people of God.

Now, it's a Greek word that's akin to the English word assembly. It literally means the called out ones, the ones who are called out to assemble, as in a public meeting.

[ 6 : 02 ] Except for Christians, it means much more than that. See, the word church is a kind of non-word in English. We get it from the word kirk, but really what it means is assembly.

So, do you know why you come out to this assembly on this day? What are you called out from, and what are you called out to? You see, funnily in this account, Luke writes in verse 32 that some were saying one thing, some were saying another, and the assembly was in confusion.

And then he writes, most of them did not even know why they were out. Most of them didn't know why they had assembled together. It's both funny and sad.

I wonder if that kind of description could ever be applied to a church service or a church meeting. You know, you imagine a business meeting, people disagreeing, one saying one thing, one saying another, confusion, and most people didn't realize or know why they'd come out together in the first place.

Truth be told, the way that many churches responded to the restrictions and lockdown showed that many people in many churches don't have a firm biblical grasp of why we assemble in the first place.

[ 7 : 24 ] Why do you come out in the first place? Imagine there's all sorts of answers, and probably all sorts of right answers. Some say one thing, some say another.

A bit of confusion, certainly there has been in churches over the past couple of years, and many don't really know why they come together in the first place. But anyway, secular assemblies, certainly this kind of confusion is very often the case when people are caught up in a public protest.

Public protests, things get out of hand, there's contradiction and confusion and people don't really know any longer what they're supposed to be doing. And we get a glimpse of this kind of scenario in Ephesus.

There's a secular assembly in protest of the Christian assembly, and although not much is mentioned about the Christians in this section, what is mentioned about them is very telling.

You see, this is what you would call a hostile witness. People are given testimony about what the Christians are saying and doing, but they're not making, they're not Christians themselves, the ones giving testimony, and they're not trying to defend the Christians, they're just talking about what they're doing.

[ 8 : 42 ] And it's a powerful form of witness when you have a hostile source accusing the Christians, and in doing so, they actually confirm true things about Christianity.

For instance, in this account, the hostile witness is saying, this Paul and these Christians are saying that God's made with hands are no gods at all. Yeah, we'll take that accusation.

We'll say guilty as charged. Apparently, the Christian assembly is turning people away from buying idols and worshipping in the temple of Artemis.

This hostile witness is confirming the fact that Christians believe that God's made with hands are not gods. It's confirming the fact that Christians don't rely on silver or handmade idols.

and it's confirming the fact that Christians don't go to temples to worship false gods. We will take that kind of witness. Okay, well, we see some of the things that we don't do in this account, but do you know why we do the things that we do?

[ 9 : 55 ] Do you know why we come together in the Christian assembly? What's the purpose of this thing that we're doing right now? To what end and to what cost? What if people misunderstood why we go out to church?

Has anyone ever had that experience? Someone in your family or a friend or a colleague? Someone misunderstands why you go out to church? Yeah, loads of people experience that. Or what if some people out there misunderstood what church was all about?

Has that ever happened? It happens all the time, doesn't it? Let me tell you a few of the accusations about the Christians who were assembled at the end of the first century.

This is some of the confusion and misunderstanding and accusations against Christians who gathered at the end of the first century, shortly after Paul's time here, right?

This is some of the accusations. Christians in their assemblies in the church were accused of atheism.

[ 11 : 02 ] Can you believe that? The Christians are the atheists because they didn't worship the state god. The church, the Christian assembly, was accused of sexual immorality.

It was accused of incest, and worst of all, it was accused of cannibalism. Can you believe that? This is what Christians were accused of.

Are there people gathered to do this kind of atheistic, sexual immorality, incest, cannibalism stuff? That's what they do in their church. Is that the kind of things we do when we assemble?

Crazy as those things sound, this is where these accusations come from. You see, Christians were accused of atheism because they didn't worship the state god, as we've said. They were accused of sexual immorality because they had a feast known as the agape, the love feast.

Now, it was just sharing dinner, love one another, sharing dinner with one another, but they were accused, oh, they have a love feast, what's that? Sexual immorality. The church assembly was accused of incest.

[ 12 : 20 ] Do you want to know why? Because they referred to one another as brother and sister. I mean, how ridiculous is that? They were accused of incest because they greeted each other with a kiss.

They called one another brother and sister, and they had secret meetings. Worst of all, they were accused of cannibalism. You can probably guess why. Because we eat the body and blood of Christ.

Cannibalism. They thought that these Christians were in their houses eating flesh and drinking blood. talk about being misunderstood. Now, remember a few chapters back in chapter 16 of Acts, Paul was prevented, remember, from going to Ephesus way back then, and he was also prevented from going to a place called Bithynia.

Well, after some time that Paul had passed by, the gospel did go to Bithynia, and many were converted in Bithynia, and there was a growing hostility in that area for those associated with the name of Christ.

And you can read about the beginnings of this hostility in Peter's letter, 1 Peter, because Peter writes to Christians in Pontus and Bithynia, and he talks about suffering for being a Christian.

[ 13 : 39 ] So that hostility was growing and growing, and by the end of the first century, the persecution was in full swing in Bithynia. And in A.D. 112, there was this governor, the imperial governor of Bithynia in Pontus, a man named Pliny, Pliny the Younger, and he wrote to the emperor Trajan about these Christian assemblies, and he wrote asking whether or not they should be punished in light of doing the things that they were supposedly doing, or just because they were associated with the name of Christ.

You see, this is the same scenario in our passage. Both what the Christians are doing when they gather and what they are stopping people from doing. People no longer buying shrines and idols, and people no longer going to the temple.

So Pliny wrote to Trajan, the emperor, to see what to make of these Christians. Now, many had been persecuted, many had been arrested, but by the turn of the century, the Christians, some of them had decanted, some of them had recanted from their faith, some of them had turned away from Christianity.

And Pliny was going about dealing with this, and there was a question of whether to punish them simply for bearing the name of Christ, which some people were then turning away from. If that's how you're going to punish us, then we reject Christ.

We'll turn away from the name of Christ so that we avoid punishment. So the question, whether they should be punished for associating with the name of Christ, or whether to punish them for these crimes that they were supposedly doing.

[ 15 : 27 ] So should a person be punished for being part of a group, or should they be punished on the basis of a crime associated with that group? And so those who renounced their faith were in favor of the former, because they'd now disassociated with the name, so they should be safe.

Whereas those who remained Christians were in favor of the latter, because there were no actual crimes in the first place. It was a misunderstanding. But these ex-Christians, in order to cover themselves, they didn't only denounce Christ, but they also became informants, and they told Pliny of the activity of the Christians when they assembled.

They didn't say false things, but they spilled the beans about the Christian assemblies, so as to say, Pliny, if you're going to persecute us, we've turned from Christ, but if you're going to persecute us on the basis of the things we used to do, well, let us just reassure you that they weren't crimes.

We didn't actually eat flesh. We didn't actually partake in incest. And so when Pliny writes to Trajan, he writes this description about the Christian assembly from these informants.

And this is what he says. I managed to get a hold of the letter. No, I just printed it out. Pliny to the Emperor Trajan. And he's talking about these Christians.

- [ 16 : 54 ] And this is just a portion. He says, about these Christians, remember the accusation is they're atheists. They're sexually immoral. They practice incest and they are cannibals.
- So Pliny found out from these ex-Christians what they really got up to. And he's like, oh, okay. So he writes to Trajan and he says, well, these people, this is what they actually got up to.
- They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light. When they sang in alternate verses, we did that, they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as to a God.
- And they bound themselves by a solemn oath, but not to some crime. Their solemn oath was to never commit any fraud or theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, and never to deny a trust when they should be called upon to do so.
- And when this was over, it was their custom to separate and then reassemble later to partake of food. But food of an ordinary and innocent kind, not people's flesh and blood.
- [ 18 : 14 ] They weren't really practicing sexually immoral things. They weren't really involved in incest. They weren't really cannibals. Cannibals. This is what they got up to.
- Quite innocent. What are we to do with these people? Pliny found that these Christians were not quite like the accusations leveled at them, but a problem remained.
- There was still a problem with these Christians. You see, the result of many people converting to Christianity, in Pliny's own words, Pliny went on to say, well, this is what's happening.
- The temples are deserted. The religious rites have been neglected. And the sacrificial animals are no longer being purchased.
- That's a good thing. But not to the religion and economy of the empire. You see, he goes on to say that when opportunities were afforded for repentance, that is to turn Christians away from Christ, many can be reformed.
- [ 19 : 22 ] Basically meaning through the threat of persecution, many people will curse Christ and return to their formal religion and worship the image of the emperor. So he still went about persecuting the Christians.
- You see, Christians may not be criminals, but their way of life certainly disturbs the religion and economy of the world. This is what we find in Ephesus in our passage.
- Christians are not the lawless ones in this passage. The Christians are not the troublemakers. The secular assembly is they're the lawless ones.
- But as Luke writes, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way. As we read last week, Paul was spent two years teaching so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.
- It's been two years apparently before a disturbance arises. But like Pliny later said, the result of conversion is that people are deserting the temples. People are neglecting their prior religion and no longer buying the products of that religion.
- [ 20 : 30 ] Shrines and idols. Sacrifices. Or as Demetrius in our passage says, the silversmith who made a lot of money out of the shrines of Artemis, he sold.
- As he says, not only in Ephesus, but almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded many to turn away saying that God's made with hands are not God's.
- Here in Ephesus, we have a hostile witness telling the world that both Paul and the way is promoting this idea that God's made with hands are not God's.
- And so I think that Luke concludes this account, not just because it's a great disturbance, but he includes this account because it vindicates Paul and it vindicates Christianity.

It shows what Paul and Christianity is all about and it shows that they are not the lawless ones. You see, the fact that the complaint against Paul and the way is that people are turning away from false gods and false religion.

[ 21 : 37 ] And also the fact that it's not the Christians rioting, causing disorder, but it's the secular ones vindicates in the book of Acts that if the gospel, if the gospel's a threat, if the gospel is any kind of threat at all, it's not a threat to order and good.

It's only a threat to darkness and idolatry and disorder. You see, we should not be surprised when there are disturbances concerning Christianity, concerning the way, because that's what happens when light shines in dark places.

It upsets those who love darkness. The church should bless the town with its good deeds, but it should also disturb the town of its dark deeds.

Now, that won't necessarily mean Christians are out there protesting in the streets, but rather the church assembly, the Christian assembly, are turning away so many people from darkness that it disturbs the religion and economy of the world.

You see, the activity of the Christian assembly is not to protest, it's not to riot, but to practice what is true and not what is false. To turn people away from what is false to what is true.

[ 23 : 02 ] The activity of the secular assembly and the world is often the one that is proven to be lawless. You see, it's an absolute travesty when it's the opposite way around.

It's a travesty when the church is shown to be criminal or lawless. It's not the way. It should be obvious when the disturbances arise, wherever that happens, whatever town it's in, whatever disturbance it is, and there are many, it should be obvious when disturbances arise that it's the non-believers who are acting in lawless ways.

You see, Jesus defeats evil not by destroying us, but by turning us from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. And this is what we see in Ephesus.

And Ephesus was a bit of a stronghold of darkness and the imperial cult in the empire. So it's no wonder that there's upset people are turning away from the temple, less people are purchasing these shrines of Artemis.

It's not just humans who are unhappy about this. As you can read in Paul's letter to Ephesus later on, he says, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

[ 24 : 28 ] Now, yes, Demetrius is a man, and he is upset because it affects his trade that he makes wealth from. But remember, his trade is a trade of darkness.

A silversmith making shrines to a false god. He's making money off of people worshipping false gods and not the true God. If that isn't the power of darkness, I don't know what is.

And he even uses that to justify his complaint, saying that Paul is turning people away from the great Artemis and is making a mockery of their great goddess.

Yet you can see throughout this whole ordeal that it's not the Christians who are acting in criminal ways. It's the wealthy shrine merchants who stir up the crowd and start a protest that turns into a riot.

And we know this is the case. How many riots? How many riots does the world need to see before people learn that nothing good comes from getting involved? Protests often start with good intentions, but soon more people get involved and the crowd turns into a mob doing things their relatives would think.

[ 25 : 43 ] They would never do that. Can you think over the past couple of years any riots that have happened? London, America, all over the world.

Riots. Think of these riots, you know, these things that started out as protests. It's peaceful protests that turned into riots involving looting, violence, and vandalism.

Cars smashed up. Buildings set on fire. Peaceful protest. Turns into a riot. Even the U.S. Capitol building in D.C.

was stormed by a mob of a couple of thousand people. Just a couple of years ago. It's no different from this mob in Acts 19. Demetrius starts rallying people, stirring them up with accusations against Christians.

And suddenly people going about their daily business get pulled into the commotion, start joining in with a chance. The crowd grows larger. The chants grow louder.

[ 26 : 51 ] Confusion follows. And after confusion, violence. The first victims of the mob are a couple of Christians called Gaius and Aristarchus. Paul's travel companions.

And Paul, Paul wants to intervene. He sees his friends getting dragged into this and beat up. And Paul wants to intervene. But the wisdom of his friends prevent him.

Even high-ranking city officials who were friends with Paul told him, Don't get involved with this. Don't go anywhere near this riot. Nothing good will come from it.

And in almost like every out-of-control protest, verse 32, Some cried one thing, some another. The whole assembly was in confusion. And most of them didn't know why they were there in the first place.

That describes most protests that happen still today. It's comical on the one hand, but sad on the other. People get involved without even really knowing what they're getting involved in.

[ 27 : 56 ] It's a large enough crowd. And so, these two human beings must be worth beating up. You end up getting pulled into this riot, you know, this protest.

And there's two sorry souls getting beat up. And you think, well, they must deserve it. I'll get my boot in. You know, I'm just, I've been to the shops and I'm just going home, but I may as well get a boot in on the way home.

You end up seeing the local supermarket lady, the optician, the farmer, the school teacher, the lollipop man, the health worker, the restaurant waitress, all getting their punches in on the way home.

Only later, wondering to themselves, I wonder what that whole thing was about. Anyway, I wonder who those two people were. It's not Christians who do this.

It's not the Christian assembly that does this. This is the church of the world. This is the ecclesia, the assembly of the world that descends into darkness. Shop windows smashed, cars trashed, buildings set on fire, all in the name of a peaceful protest.

[ 29 : 07 ] protest. This is not what the Christians do when they assemble. People get trampled and harmed by other protesters or beaten up by a stick by the police for being among the rioters. Seldom does it ever achieve what it sets out to achieve.

But like in the end of our passage, verse 40, the protesters themselves end up being the ones in danger of being charged with criminal activity. You see, and they have no leg to stand on to justify their actions.

You see, this is the difference between the church of Christ and the church of the world. The people who are accused, the Christians, are themselves the victims.

The people who are accused are proven to be guiltless of the accusation, yet the accusers themselves are in danger of being charged with criminal offenses.

The assembly of Christ is not a lawless assembly. It's often the assembly of the world that is lawless. Because one is of light and the other is of darkness.

- [ 30 : 12 ] You see, where true religion meets false religion, if you want to know which one is true and which one is false, the ones who end up acting in lawless ways are the false ones.
- If you want to know who the true Christians are, they will be the peaceful ones. They will be the ones getting beat up. And so, while the light always disturbs the darkness, the Christians will not be the lawless ones when it happens.
- And they will not be the ones relying on images and things made with hands. They will not be the ones who are precious about their wealth. It's not just that the assembly of darkness is more violent and disordered compared with the assembly of light, but also that those who belong to the church of the world rely on things made with hands as their gods.
- They worship man-made things, and they look to silver and temples. You see, it's interesting, I don't know if you noticed this, but the one who started all this commotion was a silversmith.
- Do you remember something before about silver? 50,000 pieces of silver worth of magic books destroyed. You see, these Christians weren't bothered about silver.
- [ 31 : 40 ] They could have sold the books for 50,000 pieces of silver, but they said, no, we'll destroy it. Yet it's a silversmith worried about his own wealth that causes all this commotion.
- You see, Christians found these things to be worthless and happy to destroy them. The Christians don't care about these things.
- They don't care. They don't have a need for magic. The Christians don't have a need for silver. They don't have a need for man-made gods. Because we know something.
- We know that silver cannot buy you forgiveness in life. Your silver won't set you free from sin, nor will it save you from death.
- Doesn't matter if you use your silver to buy magic books. Doesn't matter if you have 50,000 pieces of silver to yourself. Doesn't matter if you have great wealth. And it doesn't matter if you rely on silver man-made shrines to gods.
- [ 32 : 43 ] They will all let you down. None of them can save you. These gods made with hands are not gods. What it means to trust in Jesus is that we stop relying on things made with hands and we start relying on the one who made everything.
- I'm not saying that there isn't a use for things like houses, cars, medicine, money, but none of these things will save us. None of these things will bring us the peace that we long for.
- None of these things can give us the joy that we long for. You see, we know as Christians these won't save us. But do we still look to these things for our joy or our peace?
- Our satisfaction, contentment. Why do we assemble? Why do we assemble on this day at this time? It's not because there's anything special about this building that we assemble in.
- As nice as it is, this building's nice. But let me tell you what was nicer. See the temple of Artemis? Far nicer than this building.
- [ 33 : 59 ] It was one of the ancient wonders of the world and it was one of the best of all the ancient wonders of the world. But even the temple of Artemis would do nothing for you in the end. Christians are being driven from their towns and cities right now because of wars.
- Others because of persecution. These things, we don't rely on buildings.
- We don't rely on shrines. We don't rely on silver. We don't rely on things made with hands. Any of these things can be taken away in an instant. And Paul was persuaded and turned away a great many people.



Turned away a great many people from worthless things that cannot give us what we need. Whether it's big things like forgiveness and salvation or whether it's our joy, our peace, our safety.

It is not with the assembly of the world that we will find these things. But with the assembly of Jesus we will find where we can truly get forgiveness, salvation, joy, peace, safety, satisfaction.

[ 35 : 06 ] And so when we do assemble together, we don't assemble because we rely on this building. We don't assemble because we rely on things made with hands.

We don't assemble for any crime or any protest. We don't assemble to do so in disorder and disagreement. We do not stir one another up to riots, but we stir one another up to love and good works.

We do not remind ourselves, we don't gather together to remind ourselves of our need for silver or shrines or church buildings or temples.

We don't do that. Rather, we remind one another of our need for Jesus, that we should lift our eyes away from things made with hands and fix our eyes on Jesus, who's the maker of all things.

And we'll finish with this. When Pliny was persecuting the Christians, when he was trying to determine whether someone was a Christian or not, he used a test.

[ 36 : 12 ] He did three things, a test of three things to see whether someone was a Christian or not. This was the test. Firstly, he had the people repeat a formula of invocation to the gods.

Secondly, they had to offer supplications of incense and wine to the image of the emperor and the image of the gods. And the third thing they had to do was they had to curse Christ and they had to revile the name of Jesus with a malediction.

Yet Pliny, Pliny said to Trajan that he'd found out from others that true Christians cannot be compelled to do any of those things.

You see, those tests will get those who will turn to avoid persecution but he said, well, the truth is this test isn't really, you know, this test cannot compel any of the true Christians to do any of these things.

You know, so yeah, you'll find a true Christian but you'll not get them to return to false worship. You'll not get them to bow down to the image. You'll not get them to buy the shrines and sacrifices.

[ 37 : 30 ] A true Christian cannot be compelled to do any of these things because we know there's only one God. We don't bow to any of those images or offer sacrifice to any of those images.

There's only one God and he's not made with hands that we should offer things to him in that way. There's only one God and his name is Christ Jesus and we will not curse him.

We will not revile the name of Jesus with a malediction. We cannot be compelled to do that even in the face of death. So when we gather, we don't gather for crime.

We don't gather for protest or rioting. We don't gather because we think there's something special about this building. We gather and we remind one another not of our need of these other things like silver and man-made things but we remind ourselves of our need for Jesus.

The only true God. The only one who can do what we need him to do. Not only that we should learn to rely on him but we should rejoice and give thanks that we actually can rely on him because where everything else fails, Temple of Artemis, Ancient Wonder of the World, Silver Shrines, 50,000 pieces worth of silver, gold, money, things made with hands will all let you down.

[ 38 : 58 ] Where all these things fail, Jesus will never fail. Let me pray. Our God and Father, we give you thanks in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, that you have turned us away from these false gods.

You've turned us away from things that we cannot rely on and you've turned us toward your son, Jesus, who is the one true God that we should have forgiveness and life in his name.

and so let us stir one another up to love and good works in his name. Let us remind one another of his goodness and grace towards us and let us rejoice together with one another in his name, singing a hymn to Christ as to a God because he is our Lord and our God.

In his name, we give thanks and pray. Amen. Amen.