

Acts 18:18-19:10 "Knowing About Jesus and Knowing Jesus"

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me, actually, to know as I'm preaching how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

The sermon today from George that I'll be reading is from Acts chapter 18, verses 18 through to chapter 19, verses 10. So I'll just read George's sermon, and you can pretend it's, well, it's coming for him, not for me. So greetings. I am writing the sermon as if it is me speaking. I am sure that it will sound odd to you at times. Case in point, I think this is only the third time in my long ministry that I was not able to do the Sunday morning service. I know this sounds odd, having Josiah say this, and for the record, I was ordained quite a few years before Josiah was born.

Those of you who came to the Christmas Eve evening service might remember me saying that because I never write out my sermon text, I made a mistake trying to write out the text of my sermon for that day so that my early sermon was less stellar, less than stellar. I abandoned my written text in the evening and did a sort of a hybrid sermon. But here I am writing a sermon. I pray that you give me and Josiah a lot of grace. What follows is in many ways more of an expanded outline than a proper sermon. If you are outside of the Christian faith, you might not realize that the Bible text that we are looking at today has caused two big controversies among Christians. I will mention this very briefly when we come to it, but I'm going to basically ignore the controversy.

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[3 : 00] I will say again, the point of these transitional stories is not to support a narrow theological controversy, but are important to help us understand what it means to enter into Jesus Christ and grow into him. The Jesus way into which we enter is radically different and more beautiful than the religions, spiritualities, and therapies of this world. Why is it that time and time again, the religions and spiritualities of this world encourage a way of life that we would reject if the same things were happening in a personal relationship? That's a theme that George comes to more towards the end, so to keep in mind. Let's look for ourselves. Once again, I encourage you to bring your own Bibles to church so you can check what I say. And in fact, if you don't have one on hand right now, we have three there that in the kind of light blue Bibles there, so feel free just to grab one if you didn't bring one today. That's perfectly all right. So, starting at Acts chapter 18, verse 18.

Okay, so I'll read that out for us. After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Sencray he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. Last week we read about Paul bringing the gospel to the city of Corinth.

And then, so we'll continue on actually here. So, to verse 21. And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. But on taking leave of them, he said, I will return to you if God wills. And he set sail from Ephesus. As an aside, Luke does not tell us why Paul chose

to leave Corinth. But from what we will see in a moment, it is probably that he had a sense from God that it was time for him to return to his home church, his home church in Syrian Antioch, his sending church. We also don't know why he had his hair cut or shaved. It was not the sin of making himself look especially holy. It was probably a symbolic act from the Old Testament, a serious call to a prayerful and holy life. The real point of these verses is to set the stage for a more important encounter between Priscilla, her husband Aquila, and a traveling speaker named Apollos. But first, the journey must end. Reading verses 22 and 23. When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next, through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

[6:00] This is a very compact statement. First, Paul went up to Jerusalem. Then he went down to his home church in Syrian Antioch. Luke moves quickly into then telling us that Paul embarks on his third missionary journey. It is now that we get to the interesting part of the story. God often answers prayer in weird ways. As well, how much do you have to know to be a true Christian? This is one of the questions that we asked this morning. How accurate do you have to be to be a real Christian? These are questions that Christians sometimes ask themselves, and sometimes people are made to feel shame or guilt because they don't measure up in the knowledge and accuracy department. Let's look.

We meet Priscilla and her husband in Corinth. They are working class, and they are youngish Christians. They find themselves in Ephesus, just the two of them, with no Christian fellowship. They are Jewish, so every Sabbath they go to the synagogue. Now, the text does not say what they are doing there. But from the other parts of the New Testament, we know that they were very committed Christians and probably very prayerful. However, they are not Paul. It's important to remember that Paul had an extensive education in the Old Testament, taught by a rabbi who is still well known and read by rabbis today. And Paul was also fearless and deeply knowledgeable. I think it is safe to say that Priscilla and Aquila prayed that God would do something. And God does do something. But it is weird and unexpected. Let's look.

Verses 24 to 26. Now, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit. He spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he only knew the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. We meet... Okay, I already read that part. So Apollos shows up out of the blue. He's well off and does not seem to have to work. In the original language, it is obvious that he is extremely well educated in both Roman slash Greek studies and in the Old Testament. It's as if he has two PhDs and he received them both from the intellectual capital of the empire. What is more, he seems to have figured out most of the gospel from John the Baptist without any connection to Christians. And he, like Paul, is a very bold talker. This is God answering prayer in a completely unexpected way. Priscilla and Aquila were probably praying for boldness and for help. They were probably not praying for a wandering intellectual with two PhDs and no connection to the local church. Claire, at this point, could you please put up the first point? When you pray, be specific and open-handed. When you pray, be specific and open-handed. We know that the Lord wants you to pray specifically about situations, so you should do that. But all praying should be open-handed, not only because the Lord might say no or might say later, but because he can also answer in a completely unexpected way. I had to throw that point in. Frankly, I always needed to be, I always need to be reminded to pray. But there are a trio of linked and powerful truths here about what it means to be a Christian.

[10:10] Let's finish reading this section. Chapter 18, 26 to 28. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he had wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed. For he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. Note that this man who is well off with two PhDs had gaps and inaccuracies in what he was saying. Note as well that this working-class couple corrected him. Finally, note the work of God.

And this is the second point, if you could put that up, Claire. You do not have to pass a Bible and or theology test with 100% marks to be a real Christian. You do not have to pass a Bible slash

theology test with 100% marks to be a real Christian. And this is very comforting to us. Only Jesus would have scored 100%. You and I can read an infallible and inerrant Bible, but we will never have an infallible and inerrant knowledge. The Christian life should hopefully be one of growth. The Christian who thinks that he has arrived is in a very bad spiritual shape. Apollos was a true Christian, but he had gaps and inaccuracies. And the point that matches with this is even more important and precious. Point three, true Christians humbly accept being corrected. There is no growth into Christ without correction.

This is very important. It would be the most natural thing in the world for Apollos to sniff and think, who do these working class people think they are? They don't even know how little they know. I am the one with two PhDs and they need to learn from me. But look at verse 26 again. 26 says, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

The humility of Apollos in this story is written to challenge you and me. Don't get too big for your britches. Be humbly open to correction. Please pray for me as well. These three points will help us to understand the next story. So here is the final part of that trio. Point four, you believe into the Lord Jesus Christ by his grace. We believe into the Lord Jesus Christ by his grace. Let's look again at verse 27.

[13:13] And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed. Becoming a Christian is not only about knowing truths or compelling arguments. It's not mainly about emotions or affections, but we give ourselves to Christ for union with Christ, entering into him as he enters into us. But this is only possible by God's grace, his unmerited favor that comes with transforming power.

Now, some of you are probably thinking that this, what I've said, needs more nuance. And I agree. We get a big chunk of nuance in the next two stories. The first one being a text that is used in theological controversy. And I think that focusing on the controversy, though, people miss the bigger concerns with coming into Christ and growing in godliness. They miss how radical the gospel is in a world with hundreds of thousands of so-called gods. Let's look. This is chapter 19, verses 1 through 7.

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said, no, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. And he said, into what were you baptized? They said, into John's baptism. And Paul said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.

There were about 12 men in all. So Apollos is gone, and now Paul arrives. As an aside, Paul and Apollos would come to get to know each other and work together, but that does not come yet. Paul meets some disciples in verse 1, but as the rest of the text shows, they are not yet Christians. They are disciples of John the Baptist. No one knows why Paul asks the question about the Holy Spirit, but he does. The story is obviously condensed. Paul would have taken some time to instruct them about some of the key points of the Christian faith, but after a short while, the 12 became Christians and are baptized into Christ. Now, this text is a key basis for our friends in the high liturgical churches who say that you need to have hands laid on you by the successor of the apostles, a bishop, to receive the Holy Spirit. Oddly enough, it's also a key text for our charismatic friends who say that there are, in effect, two levels or stages in the Christian life. Bare conversion, then being filled with the Holy Spirit, which is marked by tongue speaking. You can read all about these controversies on your own, because I think that they're both well-meaning, but wrong-headed, and take us away from momentous truths. I will say no more than to say today that the overwhelming evidence in the New Testament is that when you become a Christian, when you enter into Christ and he into you, then you receive the Holy Spirit at the same time. What gets missed by talking about theological controversies is the momentous way that becoming a Christian and being a Christian is illuminated. It is the language of love. It is the language of personal relationship.

[17:19] It is the language of commitment, and it is what your heart longs for. You would be concerned if your friend started dating a man that was always bossing her around and treated her

like a slave and believed it was all right for him to lie, but this describes a major religion. Why is it all right for a god to act this way when you would tell your friend to flee from a relationship with that kind of person?

You would also be concerned if your friend started dating a man that wanted to swallow her up, whose goal was obviously to erase her personality and uniqueness, but this describes several religions.

Why is it all right for a god to act this way when you would tell your friend to flee from a relationship with such a person? You would be concerned if your friend started dating someone and it seemed as if their relationship was purely transactional. You know, you do this and I'll do that instead, or in exchange. There does not seem to be love. It just seemed to be doing things to either get things or stop things, but this describes all of paganism. Why is it all right for the gods to act like this when you would tell your friend to flee from a relationship with such a person?

But the language and imagery of gospel, biblical-centered Christianity is the language of personal love relationship. Believe is a word that is used of persons and personal relationships. Whether you say believe in Jesus or believe into Jesus, the original language, it could be understood the same way, both ways. It is the same thing. As you get to know a person, in some ways you enter into them, and they enter into you. It is one of the reasons why people who, when they've had a loved one die, they talk as if there is now a hole in them, or a chunk missing, or that their life is now incomplete.

Claire, could you please put up the point number five? To believe in Jesus is to enter into him, and have him enter into you. To believe in Jesus is to enter into him, and have him enter into you.

[19 : 46] The Holy Spirit is also God's personal presence. The Lord cannot enter into you, and you to him, without his sacrificial love. He loved you to the point of dying for you, and now he holds you, and he will not let you go. Just as with people, you can truly say you know someone, but your knowledge can be incomplete, and therefore needs to grow. Or you can think you know, what you think you know about the person reveals, that it's not just a small knowledge deficit, but that you're not even really talking about the person at all. You must not know them. You must have some knowledge, not necessarily complete knowledge. Sometimes people confidently say they know someone, but the way they talk about that person reveals that they really don't know that person. And this is the sixth point.

It is possible to know too little about Christ, and be all wrong about him, so that you are not a Christian. It is possible to know too little about Christ, and to be all wrong about him, so that you are not a Christian.

I think this is what happened to the twelve. Not the twelve apostles, but the twelve who Paul spoke to. An educated guess is that they talked of the Messiah in military terms, or about rule keeping, or some other fundamental error. No, it is Christ in you that is the hope of glory in you. There is, as the hymn says, God's dear presence to cheer and to guide, strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow.

Blessings, all mine, and ten thousand beside. Great is your faithfulness, Lord God. So the twelve, they heard the truth, just like Apollos, and they were willing to change.

There is no growth in godliness without openness to change. But know this, we human beings are not neutral. Bishop J.C. Ryle used to say that the sun that softens the wax hardens the clay.

[21 : 56] If we close ourselves to change, we do not stay neutral. We become hardened. Let's look at the last part, verses 8 through 10.

And he entered the synagogue, and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Here we see both gospel growth and hardening of hearts. This is the seventh point. Beware that you do not harden your hearts against the gospel, against the Bible, and against the Lord Jesus Christ.

Beware that you do not harden your heart against the gospel, against the Bible, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, pray for those outside the faith, that they will enter into Christ.

Pray for each other, that we will die daily to hard hearts and have tender hearts instead. Pray for the Holy Spirit to move in us with power and with love. Pray that the Lord will lead us and guide us into

all truth.

[23 : 29] Pray that you will remember that the Lord does not weigh our merits, but pardons our offenses through Jesus Christ. Please stand. And let's pray.

Father in heaven, we thank you, most merciful Lord, that you, through our beloved Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that you do not weigh our merits.

You don't look to what we do, to how many books we read, to how many good deeds we do, or to our thoughts, but you, you pardon our offenses, because Jesus Christ has taken our place before you, and he has died on our behalf.

And we are raised with him when we put our faith in you. We thank you for your grace and for your love, and we pray that you would incline our hearts to you, that you would incline our hearts to you, that we would worship you, that we would love you, that we would be blessed by you.

We pray these things in your name. Amen. Amen. Amen.