

# Acts 19:1-41

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[ 0 : 00 ] Father, I pray that you hold us fast as we hold fast to your word. May we each grip your gospel this morning.

And may it continue to increase and prevail mightily in our lives and in our city.! In Jesus' name, amen. All right, you can be seated. And as you sit, grab the Bible in front of you and flip back to page, it was 828, right? 928.

There is more action in Acts chapter 19 than there is in a Canada World Cup game. So, it's Father's Day.

We needed a dad joke to start us off, right? This morning, we return to the book of Acts. The book of Acts records what happened right after Jesus died and three days later rose from the dead. The book of Acts, then, is like a bridge. It connects the life and work of Jesus to the life and work of his church.

[ 1 : 08 ] And what that means for us is this book connects us here today with Jesus' work on earth. It describes for us how God works in the world and how his people are invited to participate.

It's all about the acts of the risen Jesus through his followers, empowered by his Holy Spirit. And what you see in the book of Acts is God's strategy to fulfill his mission is to send his followers, to send his apostles to the centers of civilization, to great cities of the Roman Empire, to preach the gospel in globally connected urban centers.

The apostle Paul deliberately went to cities because cities shape culture. Ideas spread out from cities.

People come into cities and then they carry those ideas home when they leave. And that's why Acts chapter 19 matters for us. Ephesus was one of the great cities of the ancient world.

Vancouver is one of the great cities of our own. So if we want to learn how to reach our city, we should pay very close attention to how Paul reached his.

[ 2 : 32 ] Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia, modern-day Turkey. It was a global gateway city. It's where east meets west. It was a political center. It was an economic hub.

But what it was most famous for was its spirituality. The temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, dominated the city. It was the religious center of the ancient world. So what does Paul do when he shows up in this great city? What should we do as we long to share Christ with a global city that's full of spiritual people who don't share our faith?

Paul proclaims a gospel that is bigger and it's better than the spirituality and the superstitions of the city he enters. Paul finds in Ephesus people are pursuing purpose in all the wrong places.

He first encounters people in Ephesus who believe in repentance without Jesus. And he brings them something better than just moralism. He encounters other people who practice religion without Jesus.

[ 3 : 44 ] And he shares a faith that is more powerful than empty spirituality. And he encounters still other Ephesians who are pursuing prosperity without Jesus.

And he proclaims a gospel that is infinitely more precious than idolatry. Better than moralism. Better than moralism. Better than spirituality. Better than idolatry.

Paul brings the gospel of Jesus Christ. And this gospel he brings, this word of the Lord, he shows to be more beautiful, more powerful, more wonderful, more extraordinary than anything else the world can offer us.

Paul shares Jesus. And Jesus transforms a city. So first, let's see how the gospel is more than moralism.

This is the beginning of Acts chapter 19. The Christian message is more than a moral code. It's a person. Paul shows up in Ephesus and in verse 1 he meets people who are spiritually open.

[ 4 : 51 ] But their knowledge of the gospel is extremely limited. I don't know if you've ever met someone like that. I do. And I have kind of polite questions to try and ascertain where they're at in terms of faith.

Have you ever been to church before? What do you think of this morning? Listen to what Paul asks them in verse 2. These spiritually open people. These disciples. First thing he says, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

I've never tried that. Maybe I will in the coffee hour. For Paul, this question reveals something. Because it reveals how you figure out where someone truly stands spiritually.

He asks them, basically, Do you know God personally? Has the God of the universe entered your life?

Do you have a living faith with the living God as his own spirit lives in you? And they give their answer. No.

[ 5 : 54 ] We haven't even heard there's a Holy Spirit. These disciples are not yet believers. They don't know God. I think that's a pretty accurate representation of our city as well.

Vancouver is full of disciples. Full of students of spirituality. Spirituality. It's full of people who are trying to find meaning and peace and healing and fullness.

I once heard 80% of people in Vancouver consider themselves spiritual. But even though most of our neighbors are spiritually open, most of them do not know God.

They don't have God's Holy Spirit within them. So Paul asks a follow-up question in verse 3. Well, into what then were you baptized? They say, into John's baptism.

Paul replies, John baptized with a baptism of repentance. And there's the key. These disciples believe in repentance.

[ 7 : 01 ] These people believe. They see that their lives are headed in the wrong direction. They know what they should turn from.

But they don't know who they should turn toward. They believed in repentance without Jesus. Now, our secular city actually has a very strict moral code.

We're taught how to virtue signal in certain public settings. There are thou shalt and thou shalt not in Vancouver, right? Our city actually believes in repentance.

But it doesn't believe in Jesus. Ironically, most non-Christians in our city think that our faith is just rules. They see Christianity as simply a moral code.

We are defined by what we prohibit. Discipleship, for them, is only about omission. Religion is only repentance.

[ 8 : 06 ] And this is where Paul shares that the gospel is about more than moralism. The Christian message is not a moral code. It's a person.

Christianity is not just about knowing rules. It's about knowing God. The disciples knew repentance, but they didn't know Jesus. I had coffee on Main Street with a man ten years ago when I worked at a previous church.

And he'd been raised believing Christianity was mainly about rules. As a young adult, he came out as gay. And he assumed that the Christian faith was therefore no longer for him.

But now, as I met with him, he'd left that lifestyle, and he now was following Jesus. And I asked him, how is the gospel good news for a gay person?

Because to me, it seems like bad news. Terrible news, even. Sounds like a list of rules that sentence you to a life sentence of singleness and loneliness and sexual suppression and frustration.

[ 9 : 19 ] And he looked at me and he said, oh, Chris, having Jesus in my life, knowing Jesus, is so much better than anything the gay lifestyle could ever give me.

Our faith is not just about rules of what we cannot do. It's not just about repentance. It's about the God of the universe breaking into your life.

It's an invitation to know God. And it is so much better than anything the world can offer you.

Christianity is so much more than moralism.

And our city needs to hear this. Now, don't get me wrong. Repentance is an essential first step in following Jesus. You can't walk in willful sin and follow Jesus at the same time.

Those two roads lead in opposite directions. But simply stopping sin is not an end in itself. The point of repentance is to turn from your wickedness, to see God in the face of his son, and to now live your life as God intended, joyfully following Jesus and experiencing his Holy Spirit within you.

[10:35] Upon hearing about Jesus, these disciples are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and they receive the Holy Spirit. The gospel includes both repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ.

These people now know God. Jesus takes these disciples, and he goes to the Jewish synagogue in verse 8. This is always Paul's strategy at a new city.

He always goes to the religious first. And he starts, of course, in the synagogue. Paul speaks to the religious, to the Jews. He speaks boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God, we're told.

And we're told some become stubborn, and they continue in unbelief, speaking evil of the way, that means the Christian faith, before the congregation. So Paul withdrew himself from them, and he took the disciples with him.

I noticed this week, not everyone in the synagogue rejected Paul. Notice it says, some. So the movement's growing. In verse 9, Paul takes the disciples, and he moves to a public lecture hall, owned by a guy named Tyrannus, which translates in English to tyrant.

[11:49] Tyrant's Hall. That should be our next church plant. Paul dialogues with anyone and everyone who comes for hours every day, and he does this, we're told, for two entire years.

And the result? Look at verse 10. What happens after two years of proclaiming Jesus in a public lecture hall? All the residents of Asia, that's the entire province, heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

It's amazing. John Stott notes that to reach the religious, Paul goes to a religious building. And to reach the non-religious, Paul goes to a non-religious building.

Some people will not enter religious spaces. And so we, as followers of Jesus, must be willing to go to neutral spaces in the hope that we may share Christ with people where they are at.

Paul isn't committed only to religious buildings or non-religious buildings. He's committed to reaching this city. And he's willing to go anywhere he can to share Christ. If we only speak about Jesus in church buildings for one hour a week and nowhere else, the gospel will not spread through us.

[13:08] Imagine if Paul left Ephesus as soon as he experienced opposition at the synagogue. Now forget this city. I'm going to go north to Macedonia. No, no, he persevered to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen.

Because he believed that our faith is more than mere moralism. It's about knowing the God of the universe. It's about knowing Jesus. Having Jesus in your life.

And it's infinitely better than anything the world can offer you. Paul comes to Ephesus and he shares a faith that's more than moralism. And secondly now, he shares a faith that is more than mere religion.

Look at verse 11. God was doing extraordinary miracles. By the hands of Paul. All miracles are extraordinary, by the way. That adjective seems a bit redundant.

But the point is, what's happening here is so unusual. It's extraordinary, extraordinary things. Supernaturally supernatural.

[14:12] This is not something we should seek to replicate. Holy hankies. That was the first title of this sermon. But... The point of all of this is that God is at work through Paul.

God is doing extraordinary miracles in extraordinary ways to show that Paul is empowered and his ministry and message are from God.

And in verse 14, some brothers, pastors, kids, the sons of Sceva the high priest, they see God working through Paul and they think Paul has learned some deep, powerful magic.

Some new religion that they think they can monetize and steal and use for personal profit. These men know about Jesus, but they don't know Jesus.

In verse 13, they recite what they think are the magic words to an evil spirit. Abracadabra, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims. They assume that Jesus is a power they can simply harness.

[15:20] A God they can use for their own means. And the evil spirit replies, Jesus I know. Paul I recognize. But who are you?

I think there might have been an expletive in what the evil spirit said. These sons of Sceva didn't know Jesus as their Lord and so a demon becomes their overlord.

Mastering them, lording over them, shaming them, wounding them. Jesus is not a spiritual power that we can just use for our benefit. He's not our golden ticket to heaven. He's the Lord of the universe who demands our allegiance. Christianity is more than a religion. It's a relationship. It's the announcement that you can know God through Jesus and his own spirit can dwell within you.

Christianity isn't magic. This isn't spiritual technology. It's not a tool for getting what you want. Jesus is not just a power to harness.

[16:26] He's the Lord to whom we surrender. Okay, at the beginning of the chapter, Paul meets people who are missing Jesus. Here he meets people who are trying to use Jesus.

The first group lacks the gospel and the other group is trying to manipulate it. But both of them need the same thing. They need Jesus. So through the foolishness of the sons of Sceva, look at how God works.

Listen to verse 17. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus what these sons had done, both Jews and Greeks. And what happens?

The fear fell upon them all. And the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Jesus is glorified and proclaimed as Lord through the wickedness of the sons of Sceva.

God can use anyone. Look at verse 18. Many who are now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and they burned them in the sight of all.

[17:33] And they counted the value of them and they found that it came to over 50,000 pieces of silver. And so the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Through Paul proclaiming God's word and through God's mighty works many in Ephesus come to faith. And the first indication that someone knows Jesus is they confess their sin and they turn from it.

One of the first evidences of the Holy Spirit's work in a person is an awareness of their sin.

Repentance is the first step in discipleship.

And so these new believers in verse 18 take what was once most valuable to them, their magic books and spells, their livelihood, and they burn them as if they're worthless garbage.

The value of 50,000 silver coins is millions of dollars in worldly wealth today. But these believers now understand that knowing Jesus, having Jesus in their life, is infinitely better than anything any idol can offer them.

[18:44] when people truly know Jesus, they stop clinging to substitutes. Which leads us directly to the final scene in Acts 19, my final point.

Number three, knowing Jesus is better than worshipping idols. Ephesus is full of idols. It's been excavated.

There's a room, an Ephesian room in the British Museum. It's full of idols. The temple to Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was four times bigger than the Parthenon in Athens.

It's actually the same dimensions as a soccer field. Interesting. Imagine someone worshipping a soccer field. Imagine that. There's a temple called in Ephesus and it fueled the commerce and culture of the entire city and the entire region.

And there's one silversmith, Demetrius, who made shrines to Artemis and he saw the threat of Paul's message to his business and the entire financial structure of his city.

[19:52] And so he starts a riot. It's pretty scary. It's pretty dicey for the Christians until the town clerk convinces the whole mob to disperse. Friends, our city is full of idols.

Ephesus worshipped Artemis. Vancouver worships tons of things. The two examples that instantly come to mind is we worship real estate and we worship autonomy.

Our city worships owning homes and wealth and equity and status, believing that only these things can guarantee our security. It's idolatry.

Another idol is autonomy. we worship the power we claim to define ourselves on our own terms based on our own desires.

And we then manifest and live out these self-conceived identities however we wish. Jesus is presented in Ephesus as the Lord.

[20:58] If Jesus is your master, your God, your Savior, if he is the Christ, the King of the Kingdom of Heaven, then he is over all and he therefore must be our highest allegiance.

And this threatens the idols of our hearts and the idols of our city. Christianity is resisted because it threatens to dethrone the idols with the true Lord.

So in Acts 19 we have met three groups of people. Disciples of John at the beginning they wanted repentance without Jesus. That's just moralism.

The sons of Sceva wanted spiritual power without Jesus. That's just empty religion. Demetrius and his craftsmen wanted prosperity without Jesus. That's idolatry.

And to all three groups the gospel offers the exact same thing. Jesus himself. The gospel is good news because it invites us to know God by believing in his son and receiving his spirit.

[ 22 : 08 ] Ephesus was a great city was spiritually hungry economically powerful and it was filled with idols. Sound familiar? God sent Paul into Ephesus he sends us into Vancouver.

Vancouver does not need more morality. It does not need more spirituality. It does not need more prosperity. What our city needs is Jesus and that's exactly who we've been sent to proclaim in this place at this time.

We bring the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord. Some will reject it some receive it but our task is the same as Paul's to share Christ with our city.

And as we do we pray that what was true in Ephesus would be true in Vancouver. That the word of the Lord would continue to increase and prevail mightily.

Amen.