

Acts 19:11-20

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[0 : 0 0] Let me invite you to turn there in the Pew Bible, the page numbers in the bulletin. Continuing our series in the book of Acts this summer, looking at Acts 19. Let me read this text for us.

And Paul 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. And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick.

And their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.

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

[1 : 3 8] And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, and fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

Also, many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices, and a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all, and they counted the value of them and found it came to 50,000 pieces of silver.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. Let's pray together. Lord, Lord, we have just heard that your word is mighty and it prevails.

So God, we ask that this word that we have read and the message that it contains by your Holy Spirit would prevail in our midst this morning.

And Lord, that we would find what our hearts desire and who you are calling us to be more and more as we turn to you and your word this morning. Amen.

[2 : 5 7] So where does spiritual power come from? The New Testament is clear that every believer is engaged in a conflict, not just with sinfulness and brokenness outside of ourselves, but also with sinfulness and brokenness inside.

Jesus himself said, in this world, you will have trial. In other words, you can expect there to be challenges, temptations, conflicts. So where do we get the power to meet these challenges?

Now, of course, we live in a very pragmatic age, don't we? In other words, if it works, then we'll do it. Then we'll trust it. And this means, I think, that we're always looking for new techniques or new methods to sort of get us where we want to go.

And I think that's true in the spiritual realm as well. I think most people on the street would agree that they need some sort of help spiritually. But that help usually takes the form of something that we do.

Trying out the new yoga studio down the street, a new meditation routine, the latest self-help book, whether it's 10 Steps to Overcoming Anxiety, or Three Keys to Unlocking the Real You, or whatever it is.

[4 : 13] But is all that really the answer? Well, I think Luke has something to show us this morning about real spiritual power. And where it comes from.

And even though the examples in our text this morning are perhaps a bit extreme, they highlight some important points for all of us. And as we walk through this text this morning, we're going to see that as a culture, we've actually been getting it all wrong.

And we're going to see where real, lasting spiritual vitality and spiritual strength come from. So let's look down through our passage.

We're just going to walk through it step by step this morning. And I think the first thing that we see in this passage is that lasting spiritual power resides in the Word of God.

Look again at verses 8 through 12. Here we see Paul engaged in a tireless ministry of teaching and reasoning and explaining the message about the Kingdom of God.

[5 : 12] Luke tells us that for two whole years, Paul uses the lecture hall of a man named Tyrannus in the city of Ephesus. Now, it's interesting that the name Tyrannus actually means the tyrant.

One wonders whether his students gave them that name or whether he sort of took it upon himself to sort of instill fear in the hearts of his students. But there you go. Paul sort of rents out his lecture hall midday to do some work.

And if you look at the footnote of your Bible, if you're looking at the ESV anyway, some of the manuscripts add that Paul taught there daily from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. And a lot of New Testament scholars and historians of the first century think that's probably fairly accurate.

Because that was the typical time of the day when most people were taking an afternoon rest. It was typical in the ancient world to work in the cool parts of the morning, to rest during the heat of the day, and then to return to work in the late afternoon and evening.

Some countries, this is still the practice. If you go to Spain, there's a long afternoon siesta where people take a break in the middle of the day. In fact, one historian of the ancient world wrote that in Rome during this period in the first century, there were probably more people asleep at 1 p.m. in the afternoon than in 1 a.m. at night.

[6 : 25] But here we see Paul during this lull in the middle of the day, after he had been laboring in the marketplace as a tent maker, when no one else was using Tyrannus' lecture hall, here's Paul busy at a different kind of work, reasoning daily about the kingdom of God, about the message of God's in-breaking reign, and about God's King, Jesus Christ.

And I think this is instructive for us in at least two ways. First, isn't it interesting that Paul found the time in his cultural moment when people were free to hear and to study and to learn, and he took advantage of it.

I wonder, friends, do we do the same thing with our schedules? When do you and I intentionally set aside time to study and engage and wrestle with the word of God's kingdom?

Not just personally and privately, although that's critical and necessary, but also with others. And you have to consider here that no doubt it was very costly for Paul. I mean, consider he was doing manual labor all morning, sweating in the marketplace on those hot Asia Minor mornings, and about to go back to it in the afternoon, and yet he shows up at the lecture hall, excited and ready to go.

And just as it was costly and challenging for Paul, it's going to be costly and challenging for us, there's no doubt, to rise early enough to engage with the word. Just set apart an evening in the midst of a busy week. It's going to be challenging, and there will be tiring days.

[8 : 07] But friends, don't you see here that Paul's experience of the word, as it took root and as it grew, was worth it. Look at the power that the word had in verse 10.

It has this regional effect. Luke says that all the residents of Asia, that is Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, heard the word of the Lord. As people came to this regional hub of Ephesus, this great financial and political and spiritual center of the region, this city where power was on everybody's minds, and particularly as it was a city somewhat in decline, financially and politically, spiritual power was on everyone's minds.

And people would come to this regional hub, and they would hear Paul reasoning in the hall of Tyrannus, and they themselves would become followers of Jesus, and then they would take the word with them to their hometowns.

And in fact, that's probably how some of the churches that we learn about in other parts of the New Testament got started. Paul writes a letter to the church at Colossae, and that was a church he didn't found. That was a church that was probably founded by someone who came, heard Paul in Ephesus, and then took the message with him.

We learn in the book of Revelation that there are many churches in this part of Asia Minor, and one wonders whether it was through Paul's engagement with the power of the word here, in this time, in this space of two to three years, that actually those churches took root.

[9 : 40] But it's not just the time that Paul invests that's instructive for us. Look at Paul's method. Luke again points out that Paul was reasoning, reasoning daily.

And that word is something like maybe what we would say dialoguing, engaging with questions, interacting with his listeners. You see, Paul in evangelism, in this sort of public forum, was always constantly listening and responding with others, even others who would have disagreed, even others who would have had profoundly different answers to the questions that he was positing.

You know, we often think that the way to really go deep spiritually, man, how do I actually get deep down rooted in the life of God?

We often think that the way we should really do that is to become a hermit, right? And move far out into the woods where we can never be disturbed by those pesky people asking their questions and those pesky kids who always want to eat.

Why do my children always want food? I have better things to do with my time. I want to go think. Where we can be away from distraction and the busyness of life. We think that, oh, if I could just get that, then I could really grow.

[10 : 57] Then I could really go deep. Now, solitude's good every once in a while. We see that in Jesus's own ministry, don't we? But you know, the thought that permanently getting away from people as the key to real spiritual depth and growth and power, that if we could only get away, then we'd be able to grow, friends, I posit that that's an idea we get more from Henry David Thoreau than from Jesus.

You see, the way to really grow, to find spiritual vitality, isn't to find a lonely cabin on Walden Pond away from society. No, the example of Jesus and Paul is that of rich engagement.

This week, a friend recently pointed out to me that after Paul's two to three-year stay in Ephesus, he would soon thereafter write one of the most profound books of the New Testament and probably one of the most influential documents ever written in human history, the Letter to the Romans.

And if you're familiar with that book, can't you hear in Romans those conversations, those dialogues that Paul must have had in the hall of Tyrannus? Look through that letter again and look at all the questions that he's responding to as he works his way through.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means. What then? Are we to sin because we're not under law, but under grace? Questions Paul must have heard and engaged with day after day in Ephesus.

[12 : 26] And what's the lesson? The lesson is that the best theology and the best spirituality is forged on the anvil of rich engagements in the Word with others.

And friends, even especially with those who don't yet believe. Now, we've said that the first thing we see in this passage is that spiritual power resides in the Word of God.

And in verses 11 and 12, we see God giving confirmation of Paul and his message through what Luke calls extraordinary miracles.

Extraordinary miracles. Now, here's the thing we need to see. That when Luke says extraordinary here, you know, when you and I use the word extraordinary, what do we mean? We mean, oh, it was wonderful. It was breathtaking.

It was super duper. It was extraordinary. But Luke actually literally means out of the ordinary. As in, this sort of thing didn't actually happen all the time.

[13 : 27] It's not as if when Luke rocked up to a new city, he started sweating in his handkerchiefs and handing them out. This wasn't his sort of typical mode of operation. In fact, in all of Luke's writing, this sort of sort of massive demonstration of miraculous healing seems to be something that only happens with Jesus and with Peter in this particular kind of way.

Here in Ephesus, it seems that people were literally taking the sweat rags that Paul would have worn around his head or waist while working at his tent making. That's what those words in verse 12 actually mean.

His sort of work clothes. That they were taking those, I don't know how they got them, and they were bringing them to people who were sick or demon possessed and the people would get better. You know, and it's funny, it's not even clear that Paul even approved of the practice.

Luke just says it was happening. What are we to make of all this? Well, friends, isn't it stunning to see that God in his mercy and in his condescension would choose at this time and at this place in history to act in this way?

That God's willing to stoop to use a somewhat strange and we might even call superstitious practice in order to make his grace and power known.

[14 : 55] And the real effect of such miracles was to prove as a giant confirmation of the message that Paul proclaimed. God was doing stuff like this in that massively confused and spiritually mixed up city of Ephesus so that people would stop and listen to what Paul had to say.

So that people would stop and listen to the message about Jesus. The one who had come not merely to take away their sicknesses and afflictions, but to take away the much deeper, more serious spiritual problem, our alienation from the kingdom of God because of our sin.

So in verses 8 through 12, Luke's showing us that spiritual power resides in the word and he shows us how God is confirming that message through these extraordinary miracles through Paul. And that means the more we read, the more we study, the more we memorize, the more we discuss God's word together, the more we let the gospel dwell in us richly, as Paul will say, in another place, the more we find the vitality and power that we need to face the challenges we face, whether they're personal or whether they're missional or whether they're ecclesiological, whatever they happen to be.

But Luke actually has more to show us here than just that. Because you see, if we just stopped there, it would be so easy to think that studying the Bible was merely about getting lots of ideas in our heads.

And that the point was just to sort of get all these facts and ideas in our head that we could then employ or use or implement or whatever, that the Bible would just be like a big toolbox that we could pull out at various times and in various places depending on which job we needed to get done.

[16 : 49] Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong, obviously, with immersing yourself in the truth claims of the Bible. In fact, we ought to be doing that more and more. But you see, it can't stop there.

And if our engagement with the Word becomes just that, hasn't the Bible just become one more self-help book? One more technique that we have to master and one more pragmatic solution to put beside all the rest?

But you see, the message of the Bible, friends, isn't ultimately about a set of tools and tips that we master. No, it's a message about a person who has come to master us.

That's what Luke shows us in verses 13 through 17, this episode about the seven sons of Siva. And what's happening here is that these itinerant Jewish exorcists are trying to harness the power of Jesus apart from a real relationship with Jesus.

Now, before we dive into that thought, let me just add as a sidebar that I know the idea of evil spirits can sound a bit implausible to many people in our culture.

[18 : 12] Maybe that's an understatement. Many people believe that belief in such things is irrational and probably more than a bit primitive, right? I mean, come on, in this day and age, belief in the devil and evil spirits, how could one believe in such things?

But if you're wrestling with that idea, let me just suggest a couple of quick things and then we'll move on. First, the idea is actually not that irrational if you think about it.

After all, if you believe in a supernatural personal good, God, and there are lots of really good reasons for believing in God, then it's not necessarily irrational or illogical to believe in supernatural personal evil, is it?

And as far as the belief in evil spirits being primitive or backward, I think it's helpful on that note to consider that the writers of the New Testament actually don't think that absolutely everything is caused by a spirit or a demon.

they're not thinking that under every bush and shade there's a little sprite that's going to pop out and cause mischief. And actually, if you look at verse 12 in our text this morning, you actually see Luke very carefully distinguishing between physical sickness and spiritual affliction.

[19 : 34] And you see this over and over and over and over again in the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament actually has an incredibly robust picture of reality. a picture of reality where there are physical, emotional, social, psychological, and yes, spiritual forces at work.

Now, friends, you're welcome to call that a primitive picture of reality, but I don't know, in my estimation, that seems quite sophisticated and quite robust. And actually, sort of not entrapped by the limitations that we sort of arbitrarily place on reality.

Well, anyway, if you want to hear more about that, come talk to me afterwards. I'd be happy to bat ideas around. Come back to our text. You know, one wonders in reading this sort of story about the seven sons of Siva if Luke is indulging in a bit of dark comedy here.

Right? I'm glad that some of you laughed when we read this story. Maybe it was uncomfortable laugh because we were talking about demons, but you know, I think it's meant to be a little bit funny. These seven brothers hear about Jesus and they decide they're going to try it out.

Why not? Let's put it into our repertoire. And no doubt, these guys have been making a name for themselves, trying to gain influence and wealth through practicing magic and performing exorcisms. And you know, if their father, Siva, was actually a part of the high priestly family, then you've got a picture of these guys who are far from home, dabbling in pagan magic and trying to make themselves out to be a power to be reckoned with.

[21 : 01] But in this encounter, this power encounter, the evil spirit says, Jesus, I know, and Paul, I recognize, but who in the world are you?

And these seven sons get beat up and bruised and sent running naked and wounded. And do you see what Luke wants us to see? that the sons of Siva are trying to harness the vitality and power of Jesus apart from a real relationship with him.

Now, of course, this is an extreme example, right? But you have to see that this is a danger that we all face. Jonathan Edwards, in the midst of the Great Awakening in the 18th century, when all sorts of spiritual renewals and revivals were going on, spent a lot of time considering this question.

What's the difference between a person who's merely religious and a really, truly spiritual person? Between someone who has an exterior belief and acknowledgement in God and between someone who actually knows God.

And his conclusion was this, that the religious person finds God useful, but the truly spiritual person finds God beautiful.

[22 : 25] In other words, the religious person uses God to get things, whether it's comfort or status or control or power or prestige. But the spiritual person adores God for who he is.

Perfectly good, wise, powerful, holy, glorious. The satisfier of the soul. The religious person sees God as a means to something else, and the spiritual person sees God not as a means, but as an end.

And in fact, as the end, the great goal of everything else. And do you see how the sons of Siva were trying merely to use God as a means here for their own ends, for power, for prestige, maybe even for a bit of monetary gain?

And friends, do you see how we can fall into the same exact trap? Of course, it looks different on the outside, doesn't it? But you know, whenever we say, God, I'll follow you or I'll submit to you if, if, if you take away this problem I'm having at work, if you help me find someone to marry so I won't have to be alone, if you make my life just generally comfortable, you know, not rich or anything, no money, no problems, I just want to be comfortable, just give me a life that's not that hard, God.

If you can do that, well then I'll submit to you and obey you. But you know, that's a bit obvious, isn't it? We sort of all see that.

[24 : 04] But there can even be more subtler forms of it. I mean, when you think of what it means to be a Christian, wouldn't we all say that what it means to be a Christian is to have Jesus become your Lord and your Savior?

And of course, friends, that is very true. But the deeper question to ask is, is Christ your treasure? Do you come to him not just because of something he offers, because he offers you something, but because he himself is desirable?

Because you want him for who he is and not just for what he gives. And that's where real spiritual power and vitality come from.

When we stop using Jesus and we start really knowing him. Now, you might ask, how do I get there? How does Christ become my treasure?

Well, above all, you have to see what he's done for you. The seven sons of Siva took the name of Jesus on their lips and went charging after evil, and they got beat up and ran away.

[25 : 24] But friends, Jesus Christ didn't just take our name on his lips, but took our very nature on himself. And he went charging headlong after evil.

Our evil, our sin. And he went forth into our darkness. And in that great combat, friends, in that great conflict, Jesus could have conquered with a single word.

He could have sent the darkness flying without a fight. But instead, he was voluntarily crushed and bruised and wounded and stripped naked.

And in that great conflict, when Satan seemed to have the upper hand, he didn't run, but he stayed. The innocent one underwent the penalty of evil so that sinful men and women could be given the gift of innocence.

And not just innocence, but wholeness and healing and life and identity and purpose and freedom. And when you see that he did all that for you, when you can see that, friends, doesn't he start to become your treasure?

[26 : 46] if Christ would stride into the darkness of spiritual evil for me in my place and take all of its weight so that I could step into spiritual life.

Friends, don't you want to love someone like that? And don't you find him not just a means to some other end.

Don't you find him to be the great end, the great goal of your life? So brothers and sisters, you know him that way.

Do you want to know him that way? Hmm? The beauty is he's not out to make it hard on you. He's not playing hard to get. But by his Holy Spirit is welcoming all who will come and receive him.

Friend, even this morning you can pray to him and ask him to not just become useful but to become beautiful to your heart. If you want to talk to someone after this service, do it.

[27 : 56] Pray with someone as you want to see that reality more and more in your life. That's where true spiritual vitality comes from.

Now there's one last thing that Luke wants us to see. He's shown us the importance of knowing Jesus but in the last three verses of our text he's going to show us what knowing Jesus sort of looks like in practice on the ground.

In verses 18 through 20 we see that actually knowing Christ means a lifestyle of repentance. A true relationship with Christ is characterized by deep repentance.

That's what's going on as the Ephesian Christians burn their magic books and divulge their practices. These were things that they had clung to who knows for how many years for power and for security and for protection and for their identity.

In fact, the city of Ephesus was so wrapped up in the occult that in the ancient world Ephesian writings was like a nickname for spell books. This was part of their city's heritage to be involved in this kind of thing.

[29 : 03] And now, having seen how worthy and awesome and good Jesus is, they can utterly do away with those things and make a clean break. A couple things to notice here.

Notice, friends, that this is believers doing this. That they had become believers and as they grew to see more and more of who God is in Christ, they actually turned away more and more from things that stole their life.

This was an ongoing thing. This was an event that Luke describes here, yes, but you see, the turning away from false hopes and from sinful practices, this is something we do more and more and on and on as we follow Jesus.

As you see God as he is. Notice, too, how specific this is in these last few verses. The confession and repentance here wasn't sort of a general thing, that they weren't content to sort of get together and sort of make a general acknowledgement that they were sinners and needed grace.

That was true. And yet here, they actually took objects, actual things in their lives that needed to be done away with and they brought them out into the open and they got rid of them.

[30 : 19] And they actually got rid of them in such a way that no one else could be caught up in them. Friend, I wonder if you have someone that you can do this with.

What I mean is, do you have someone in your life that you can make open and honest and concrete confession to? Do you have someone who can pray with you and walk with you as you turn your back on the old things, your old life that used to be your comfort and power and pleasure?

Do you have someone who can sort of sit with you and hear that and pray with you and walk with you as you step into more and more the new life that you have in Christ? I would encourage all of us, friends, to find someone, one of the pastors or elders, a small group leader, a Sunday school teacher, a trusted, mature Christian friend, find someone that you can make this open confession to in a practical way.

because God uses this kind of open, specific confession to break the power of guilt and ongoing sin in our lives. But the last thing we see about the sort of repentance that characterizes those who really know Jesus here is that it's costly.

That it's costly. Luke says that the books they burned amounted to 50,000 silver pieces. One silver piece was one day's wage for a common worker.

[31 : 51] It's been a long time since I've taken a math class. But if my math is right, that's 137 years of wages that went up in smoke in one day in Ephesus.

137 years. And of course, for all of us, repentance feels so costly. When we think of giving up this or that thing that we've held so close, that we've invested so much of our time into, that so much of our identity or our personality is wrapped up in, how on earth could we give that up?

Repentance is costly. And we see that. But friends, don't forget that as costly as repentance is, God has so much more to give you than what you will lose.

Whatever you give up, he will more than make up for. You know, the disciples came to Jesus one day and said, Lord, we've left everything for you. We've left our homes and our families and our jobs.

We've left our identities behind to follow you. You can hear them calculating in their minds, was any of this worth it? And Jesus turns to them and says, truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for me or for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

[33 : 58] Now, how could Jesus say such a thing? How could he make such a promise to us, his disciples?

Because Jesus was about to go lose his life for us so that no matter what we lost in following him, it'd be nothing compared to what we'd gain. That what he purchased for us was every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places poured out in him.

And friends, that's what you really want. What you want behind your friends, what you want behind your sex, what you want behind your job is a spiritual blessing that won't go away.

And Jesus has won it for you. Such that no matter what you give up in this life, could never compare to what he's given you.

[35 : 11] that God has more to give you than you will ever lose. So friend, as we close this morning, what is he telling you to turn from this morning?

What is it for you this morning? Let's ask God for the power and courage to do just that. Let's pray. God, we confess that in our own strength we are weak.

Oh God, would you meet us this morning and would you beckon us with your mercy and your grace and your strength and would you call us, God, to come unto you and to turn away from those things that might have at one point been our very life and yet need be our life no more because of you, Jesus.

Well friends, we have the privilege this morning as we respond to God's word of celebrating baptism. So if Wilson and Grace and Phil, if you guys want to come up.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.