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Impact of the Gospel

Acts 19:21-41

Intro: Last time, we just jumped right into ch19 and looked at Paul's experiences in Ephesus. We didn't talk much about the city itself although the text did provide us with some insights. Ephesus was a strategic location to plant a church which is why Paul wanted to go there at the beginning of his 2nd missionary journey. And he would have gone there if the Holy Spirit hadn't have stopped him and redirected him to Macedonia. In Paul's day, Ephesus was a port city that was enjoying the height of its glory. It had a population of over 300K, which was rather large for the time. It boasted a theater that seated 25K but it's most notable attraction was the magnificent temple of Diana (Artemis).

The temple of Diana was known as one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was lost to history for a time but in Paul's day it was in full beauty and at the height of its influence. It was as large as a football field, was supported by 127 pillars, each 60 ft high and was adorned all over with many great and elaborate sculptures. The temple of Diana served 2 purposes in that region. It was the center of quite a bit of superstitious religion and cult prostitution, which was common at such temples. It was also a major treasury and bank in the ancient world. Merchants, kings, even cities would deposit their money in the temple where it would be kept safe under divine protection. In this 1 location there was available both illicit sexual activity and massive amounts of money – what could go wrong?

From what we studied last week, what could go wrong is that Paul could show up and start preaching the gospel. Of course, the message Paul brought to Ephesus was one that demanded personal repentance and conversion. Just because he was entering a new city, Paul never felt that he needed to change or alter his message to make it more acceptable in a new society. Paul consistently taught the nature of sin, the need for repentance, the saving work of God in Christ, and the necessity of conversion. He always kept personal repentance and conversion before his mind. These are critical points because Paul's goal for any city he entered was to make disciples, plant churches and then use those churches to carry the gospel message to the surrounding region. Paul knew that the gospel message

was most effective when those who carried it were also living it.

Was Paul successful in his efforts in Ephesus? We know that he was. Luke gives us a glimpse of Paul's ministry tactics in the city. His first step was to make contact with interested people. He did that in the synagogue and in the market place. Then, once he had a core group of believers, he began to teach them the Bible. Paul taught all kinds of people: he taught the disciples of John the Baptist, he taught Jews, Greeks and Romans. It appears he even had a ministry for people involved in the occult. And Paul didn't just teach these people, he taught them for a long time – every day for about 5 hrs a day for 2 years!

What was the result? We saw last week that because of Paul's dedication to preaching the gospel and teaching the Bible, everyone in the region was able to hear the Word of the Lord (10). But, it wasn't until Christians began to get serious about their commitment to Jesus Christ that the Word of the Lord began to grow mightily and prevail (20). This was the deciding factor. As the gospel was preached and the lordship of Jesus taught; believers realized it was impossible for them to confess Jesus as Lord and still cling to their previous way of life. They could not keep one foot in the church and the other in the world. So they repented of that sin and brought their occult objects together and destroyed them. Paul's efforts spread the Word but it wasn't until individual believers took the personal initiative to fully dedicate themselves to living out the truth of the gospel in their everyday that the gospel began to have its greatest impact. The details of this tremendous impact are the subject of the remainder of ch19.

21-22 – This is a bit of housekeeping info Luke gives us here. Paul's starting to wrap things up in Ephesus, making plans to pass through Macedonia and Achaia again, then back to Jerusalem and then on to Rome. Paul wasn't just pulling place names out of a hat or throwing darts at a map. His travel itinerary was set with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As we will see, Paul will travel everywhere he planned to go; he just won't travel there in the way he expected.

Now, Luke doesn't mention it here but we learn from other NT books that one reason Paul wanted to go back through Macedonia and Achaia and then to Jerusalem was to collect and deliver a love offering he'd been collecting from other churches to help out the suffering Christians in

Jerusalem. In fact, Paul sends 2 of his ministry partners on ahead to remind the various believers in these churches of their promised financial support. It seems a significant part of the ministry of Timothy and Erastus was just to help Paul. They were assistants to him, helping him maximize his ministry. The reality is – no one can do it all, not even the venerable Apostle Paul!

This leaves Paul alone in Ephesus but, of course, he's not really alone. He has a growing, vibrant body of believers. Paul's efforts at church planting in Ephesus had been wildly successful – but they weren't without opposition. Paul was no stranger to opposition. He had become so used to it that he actually expected it and planned to work around it. But, most of the opposition Paul faced in his ministry came from unbelieving Jews. What's strange about Ephesus is that the churches greatest opposition there didn't come from the Jews but from the business class in the city.

23-41 – Somebody has a burr under their saddle! To properly understand what's going on here, we must first grasp the intensity with which these ancient cultures worshipped false gods. In our modern western world we hardly have a concept of how pervasive the worship of idols was in that day. In the ancient world, there were temples and shrines everywhere—in cities, in the countryside, even in homes. The manufacture of these shrines was big business. In a city like Ephesus, it was an extremely big business. It was the basis of the city's economy. In Ephesus, Artemis was the symbol of sexual fertility and a large part of the “worship” of Artemis was cult prostitution. So, the 2 main tenets of Artemis worship involved belief in superstition and illicit sexual activity.

It is at this point that Satan began to attack the church again, not as the deceiver but as the destroyer and murderer. Satan had been consistently defeated throughout Paul's ministry in Ephesus. Now he has incited the silversmith guild to stage a public protest against Paul and against the truth of the gospel. It would be a masterstroke of Satan if Paul's ministry would end with a city-wide attack that would result in Paul's arrest or even his death.

Wherever the gospel is preached in power, it will be opposed by people who make money from superstition and sin. Understand, Paul didn't arouse the ire of the silversmiths but picketing the temple of Diana or staging anti-idolatry crusades. All he did was teach the truth daily and send out his

converts to witness to the lost people in the city. As more and more people were converted, fewer and fewer customers had use for the silversmith's trade. **1 Tim 6:10** says, "for the love of money is the root of all evil." Demetrius and his friends were making their living off of promoting idolatry and immorality. The silversmiths were more concerned about their income than they were about Diana.

As terrifying as all this is, the riot in Ephesus was actually proof of the gospel's great success in the city. If Paul had only made a small beginning, with just a few people meeting in a home, the riot would never have happened. The effort would've had little to no impact on Ephesian society. But the fact that there was a riot and so many people got stirred up in defense of Artemis is proof of how successful the preaching of the gospel had been.

First, there had been a strengthening of the Christian community. Not only had the gospel spread so that many had become Christians, but those Christians then became serious about being Christians. Maybe that's where we should start when we ponder of social reform today: with the transformation of Christians. These Christians had so thoroughly come under the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word that they were convicted of sin, confessed it, and then brought out and destroyed the things that were opposed to their faith. The result of this was an impact on the society so strong that the riot was the inevitable reaction by those who resented it. A riot was their only recourse! Christianity had impacted their business. People are hurt most in their pocketbooks. Christians as well as other people simply lost interest in the pagan temples.

Herein lay the evidence of true revival. Paul didn't go to Ephesus to hold a revival – they were thoroughly pagan; he went to win pagans to Christ. But, we live in a society that has been saturated with a Christian-like religion for such a long time that people consider it to be passé; largely because in its present, watered-down, compromising form: it is! But, when the gospel is preached with power and Christians get serious about being Christians, the undeniable proof of this is the inevitable change in the society of that location. Bars and strip clubs close down, not because churches picket them but because the gospel removes their customer base. Prostitution disappears because they either get saved or they lose all their business. Gambling, drug abuse, crime in general drops because people's very nature

is transformed by the new birth and the presence of the Holy Spirit working in their midst.

This is not to say that we shouldn't stand up for what is right. Every October, we stand together as a church against the horrors of abortion. We do this because the life of every innocent child is precious and should be spoken up for! But, we must also realize that a silent protest is not going to end abortion. Picketing is not going to remove the customer base for all kinds of legalized evils. Collecting signatures on a petition or passing laws against "sin" does not, *cannot* change hearts, minds or basic human nature. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ does that. If we really want to change our society, our country, our world – we'll only do it effectively by living and sharing the truth of the gospel.

The silversmith guild had a lot of enthusiasm and a great deal of concern for their own financial well-being. Sales were down quite a bit that year and next year didn't look any better. Something had to be done and Demetrius was just the guy to do it. He was clever in the way he went about it. He makes a speech to the guild and begins by talking about money because he knew that's what concerned them most. But, he didn't limit his speech to financial matters; he also adds in some civic pride! Everyone knows how important Ephesus is because of the great temple of Artemis. These people have come to take away the glory of our great Artemis.

There are actually 2 defenses made for Artemis in this passage, the first by Demetrius and the second by the city clerk. One is made to stir up the mob and the other is made to quiet the mob. What's interesting is that the same appeals are used in both instances – only with different language and completely opposite results. The first defense is made by Demetrius and his first appeal is to numbers (27), basically: everybody is doing it! This is exactly what the city clerk says in vs35. The second appeal is to emotion. The pandering of Demetrius to the emotions of the gathered crowd flowed from the market place, through the streets of Ephesus and eventually poured a fired-up mob into the theater all singing the praises of Artemis! And they did this for 2 hrs straight! That's one worked up crowd!

This is the same tactics used to defend wrongdoing in our day. There is the classic appeal to numbers; though today we call it "statistics." If you can prove that enough people believe something, then obviously their belief

must be true. It seems more and more that the news outlets of today are no longer content with just sharing the news, now they like to offer up the results of opinion polls as if they were news. 68% of people surveyed believe “this” about a certain subject. What people believe to be true is irrelevant. What are the facts? People have been known to be wrong.

The appeal of numbers is more harmful to young believers. A kid goes to college and wants to live as a Christian, but is told: “Nobody holds those old values anymore.” That is not true, of course. He holds them. Of course, when people say that what they really mean is: “The majority think differently today.” At Ephesus Demetrius said, Everybody worships Artemis. Not everybody did, of course. Paul and the other Christians didn’t. But even if everybody did, that didn’t make Artemis a true goddess nor her followers right.

Sometimes the argument goes like this: “You want to have standards, but everything is relative. There is no such thing as truth today. You have your truth; I have my truth; everybody has their own truth.” Sometimes the argument goes: “Today is all there is. Don’t think about tomorrow. Don’t live for some far-off day. Enjoy yourself now.” Or how about this one: “If it feels good, do it. It can’t be wrong.” Of course, it *can* be wrong. Many things that are defended in that way are evil. Numbers and feelings will not make them right.

The city clerk used these same appeals to quiet the crowd. He appealed to the emotion of fear when he told them they were in danger of being called into question about the unlawful meeting. If you thought Paul was bad for business, just wait till the Roman legions march down Main St - heads will literally roll! But that’s not all he said. At the end of his appeal to the crowd the city clerk actually acquitted Paul and the Christians in Ephesus of any wrong doing (37) and implicated Demetrius and the silversmith guild as acting illegally by inciting the mob (38).

Who was the victor in this contest? Clearly, Paul and the Ephesian church came out of this vindicated! Paul was not harmed, the church was not attacked and the testimony of the gospel was not damaged, it was approved! All through the Book of Acts, Luke makes it crystal clear that the persecution of the Christian church was almost always incited by unbelieving Jews and not by the Romans. He is very careful to record that

Paul is repeatedly declared to be innocent by different Roman authorities. This established the legal precedent that Christianity had been recognized by various Roman officials to be no threat to Rome itself.

Christians were not always vindicated. Many of them died for their faith. But they were willing to die precisely for the reason we have been studying, namely that they looked beyond this life to the life that is to come. They judged that what was going to happen to them in the life to come was far more important than anything that could happen to them here. So they were willing to suffer here for that surpassing weight of glory. Because they were willing to suffer, Christianity triumphed.

What are the far-reaching consequences of this contest between pagan commercialism and Christianity in Ephesus?

Well, Ephesus is gone. It's a ruin that is only visited by archeologists and people on Holy Land tours. Also, it's no exaggeration to say there's not a single soul living in the world today who worships Artemis of the Ephesians, while there are multiplied millions who worship Jesus Christ and would willingly die for Him. The city is gone, the temple is gone, the silversmith guild is gone but the gospel of God's grace and the church of Jesus Christ is still here and still moving forwards.

How did Christianity triumph in the ancient world? How did Christians win the day? Not by appealing to numbers. Not by appealing to emotions. Christians didn't circulate a petition saying, "Artemis is no goddess, only the God of the OT is the true God." Christians didn't hold a city-wide rally. They didn't sing emotional songs. They did exactly what Jesus Christ had done and what He had sent them into the world to do: They preached the gospel so that lost people were converted, and once they were converted they taught them how to live for Jesus Christ.

Our situation is not exactly like Paul's. We have enjoyed the benefits of Christian influence on American society for a long time but that influence, and the benefits it provides, is quickly disappearing. Do you want to make an impact on the world today? Do you want to turn this society of ours upside down? The only way to do it is by teaching the Word and by following hard after Jesus. It doesn't take large numbers; a small group can do it. Many small groups have. 😊