

Opening Scripture: Acts 19:18 “And many who had become believers came confessing and disclosing their practices, <sup>19</sup> while many of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in front of everyone. So they calculated their value and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. <sup>20</sup> In this way, the word of the Lord spread and prevailed.”

Introduction: Today, we'll be dealing with some sensitive stuff in Paul's world—dark themes and elements that were just part of their world—it's all they knew. So, you may want to check them into Sunday School for those who have kids in the service.

In his book, *A Day in the Life of a Roman Centurion*, historian Gary Burge details the Roman soldier's life. The daily realities of being a Roman or a Jew in this Greco-Roman society were *horrific*.

**Politics: Rome's system was corrupt.** Politicians today, by contrast, if they are evil, at least try to hide it because of the social stigma of moral failure. But if a Roman politician could cheat, lie, bribe, and defame his way to prominence—he was celebrated for his political skill. Injustice was the order of the day. If you took someone to court and your opponent could bribe the official hearing the case—that was considered a praiseworthy practice.

**Society: the weak and powerless were stigmatized.** Rome's society was a strong man honor culture. They valued and celebrated strong men—devaluing and stigmatizing the helpless, the poor, the weak. Virtues like humility, kindness, mercy, altruism, equality—these were looked down upon by the Romans. So, it was a ruthless society.

**Morality: they were morally depraved.** It is difficult to even put into words what kind of morally depraved culture permeated all of Roman society.

- **Sexuality: Hyper-masculinity is an understatement.** Men were expected to be dominant aggressors in the bedroom—a real man—an honorable man takes what he wants. Men were expected and encouraged to have multiple affairs, visit brothels, to rape children (particularly male children). So long as the man expressed his dominance, he was celebrated in this culture.
  - If women, by contrast, were caught doing what was socially acceptable for men, they would be charged and tried with adultery. The Roman male was expected to rape and sexually violate the male offender and then put his cheating wife to death if it brought him too much social dishonor.
- **Slavery: One in every three people you met or knew were slaves.** When the rich fell on hard times, they would turn their slaves into the street to beg (which was considered demeaning and undignified), to steal (in which case they could be tried

and executed by crucifixion—which was the ultimate dishonor in that culture), or to prostitute themselves (considered the morally praiseworthy option).

- **Murder and theft: 62% of Roman emperors met a violent death**—considered a socially acceptable way to accede to the throne. Organized crime was rampant—in most Roman cities, business guilds would shake down local shop owners. If you refused, they could beat, rob, even kill you.

**Religion: they merged many bizarre religious practices.** They studied the entrails of sacrificed animals for the will of the gods. The formal religion of Rome's Pantheon was essentially institutionalized occultism. Local, more familiar, and personal religions regularly invoked the gods and the demonic realms for help or fortune. Women were objects of worship—and that worship often involved the sexual exploitation of the priestess. Temple virgins were occasionally discovered or accused of adultery, in which case they became sacrifices to the gods for repentance, and then the Romans would conscript young 12-13-year-old girls to serve as sex slaves in their temples. Mystery religions often involved loud tavern crooning/singing and dancing and group sex. Artemis of Ephesus, for example, was a fertility goddess—their annual festival to Artemis was a massive, week-long city-wide orgy.

I could go on and on about the horrific nature of Greco-Roman culture. But to spare you, I won't.

**That was the culture, the world into which Judaism and the Judeo-Christian faith went.**

**Main Idea: The Gospel (Good News of Christ Jesus and his salvation) pierces the darkness and saves lives.**

Let's unpack this theme in chapter 19.

## 1. Paul and Apollos were effective but controversial advocates for the Faith.

They are both described in the text as being competent advocates and defenders of the Christian faith. But as talented apologists, they found themselves in hot water in both Jewish and Roman culture—hostile to their claims and values.

Acts 18:24, 28 Apollos, a native from Alexandria, came to Ephesus...<sup>28</sup> for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.

Acts 19:8 Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly over a period of three months, arguing and persuading them about the kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> But when some became hardened and would not believe, slandering the Way in front of the crowd, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples, and conducted discussions every day in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.<sup>10</sup> This went on for two years so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews, and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord.

- **Stubbornness**—inflexible, unwilling to change our minds when presented with the truth. There are issues that no set of data could persuade us otherwise. In which case we have an unmovable bias.
- **Persisting in unbelief**—just refusing to surrender.
- **Speaking evil of the Way**—they gossiped and slandered the Christian faith before the synagogue congregation. If you advocate for and defend the truth, people will eventually ridicule or mock you.

Controversy is part of the deal. If you advocate for Christ and God's Word, you will attract the attention and possibly the scorn of those who stubbornly persist in unbelief.

## 2. Paul's preaching was accompanied by the work of the Spirit.

19:11–12 God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul's hands, <sup>12</sup> so that even facecloths or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them... <sup>18</sup> And many who had become believers..." (Two miracles here: signs and wonders at the hands or handkerchiefs of Paul; and salvation).

### Why is the work of the Spirit necessary?

So, two miracles are going on here. First, God demonstrates the gospel's truth through the Apostle Paul's ministry by signs and wonders. *But signs and wonders are rare, temporary, and usually do not accompany the preaching of the gospel by non-apostles.* How do we know this? Look at Apollos. He was a very effective speaker, teacher, apologist—no miracles!

- **We have a human nature problem.** Because people are estranged from God—the biblical phrase for this is "dead in sins." Relationally sin has left us estranged from God. Physically we are doomed to die and stay dead. Spiritually, our sense of God—our capacity to know him, walk with him, and know who we are in him—spiritually, we are incapable of recognizing the truth until the Spirit does the work of revealing to us.
- **We have a human cultural problem.** Not only do we come to the truth as sinners unable to recognize the truth, unable to receive it, unable to reason and apprehend it as truth—but we live in a culture that is conditioning us to believe falsehoods.

*For the Jews: When you expect a sword-wielding Messiah, then the message of a lowly, suffering servant who takes the full measure of Rome and the Sanhedrin's wrath cannot be acceptable.* Your culture of triumphalism has conditioned you to reject the lowly suffering Shepherd-King. The one who hangs on a cross for your sins and bids you to come and die. To carry your cross, to identify with him regardless of the cultural pressure to reject him.

*For the Gentiles: When you grow up worshiping false idols (and the gods in the spiritual realm behind those idols), detached and unmoored from the truth of God's Word (the Bible), engaging in paganism, demonism—this leads to moral insanity.* Their world psychologically and socially conditioned them to reject the Good News of salvation in Jesus. This required an outpouring of the Spirit in their midst. Apart from the work of the Spirit, their nature and their culture were such that they simply could not believe.

*For Americans: When you grow up in a society that tells you there is no objective source of truth or authority* and that you are the sovereign Lord of your life—that your highest goal is to find *and confess YOUR truth*—then the Good News that God's Son saves us from sin will be challenging to embrace.

The darkness predisposes us in our culture to reject the truth of Jesus. To justify our sin and be the sovereign Lord of our own lives. The Spirit is speaking; he is calling us and convicting us. Will we yield? Will we surrender?

**3. "Christian-like" solutions can only mimic Christian solutions.** The gospel addresses our sin and spiritual darkness. People are bound by their sins, and some are enslaved to the powers of hell. Settling for an imitation or a cheap knock off no matter how well-intentioned or close in affectation to the original, won't bring salvation, nor will it bring deliverance.

Watch what happens in this text...

Acts 19:13-17 "Now some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists also attempted to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I command you by the Jesus that Paul preaches!" <sup>14</sup> Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, were doing this. <sup>15</sup> The evil spirit answered them, "I know Jesus, and I recognize Paul—but who are you?" <sup>16</sup> Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them, overpowered them all, and prevailed against them so that they ran out of that house naked and wounded. <sup>17</sup> When this became known to everyone who lived in Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, they became afraid, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high esteem."

**What is going on here?** A Jewish school of thought practiced the magic arts—these teachers had smuggled the occult into the Jewish faith. A chief practice was the exorcism of demons from people using magical amulets. This followed a legendary tale about Solomon, who was rumored to return as Messiah wearing a magical amulet or a ring. Solomon would use this magical artifact to vanquish darkness.

**Jesus made it very clear, "One greater than Solomon is here" (Matt 12:42).** That is—Jesus fulfills and exceeds the mandate of Solomon, and he does not need to vanquish demons with magic because he is God. So Jesus stands in direct contrast to these magical priests.

**Satan can't cast out Satan. A house divided against itself will not stand.**

**The Sons of the Priest Sceva are practitioners of this dark, Jewish magic.** They are parroting Jesus and Paul's style—invoking the name of Jesus as a magical charm. But it doesn't work. Instead, the demon-possessed man beats them silly, tears off their clothes, and sends them running out of the house naked as Jay-bird.

**Obviously, Luke has included this story because IT'S HILARIOUS!** But, because it shows that when it comes to the issues central to the gospel—namely the salvation from sin and deliverance from the powers of darkness—*ONLY the gospel has the answer.*

Only the Gospel has the power to address what only the Gospel was designed to address.

**4. Confession and repentance are the keys to personal transformation.** In an increasingly hostile culture—hostile to the truth and stubbornly rejecting the message of Christ—maligning and slandering the Christian Faith—the only way for people to experience real, lasting transformation is to confess their sins to Christ and repent, turning away from those practices.

19:18–20 "And many who had become believers came confessing and disclosing their practices, <sup>19</sup> while many of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in front of everyone. So, they calculated their value and found it to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. <sup>20</sup> In this way, the word of the Lord spread and prevailed."

How do we get a prevailing church? Because you have a church that preaches and teaches the Good News of the Lord and Savior Jesus the Messiah, in the power of the Spirit for the transformation of the individual—into a community of holy saints. That transformation happens through faith, confession and repentance.

**We confess our sins to God.** 1 Jn 1:8-10 "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say, 'We have not sinned,' we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

**We confess our sins to each other.** James 5:16 "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect."

**We turn from the life that once ruled us, that kept us bound in sin and darkness.** The people in Ephesus don't just affirm the truth; they change direction. They burned their magic books. They smashed their idols. They turned away from the futility of the worldly system.

Recap:

Main Idea: We are charged with piercing the darkness and saving lives.

1. Paul Like Paul and Apollos we are called to be effective and controversial advocates and defenders of the Christian Faith.
2. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation—but it's the Spirit of God that empowers gospel preaching. Overcoming nature and culture.
3. "Christian-like" solutions can only mimic Christian solutions. A lot of Christian parodies in culture right now.
4. Confession and repentance are the keys to personal transformation. The gospel works from the inside out—transforming sinners into saints.