

The Gospel in Vanity Fair

Acts 19:23-41

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Let's turn together this morning. If you have your Bibles with you, turn to Acts chapter nineteen. We will be finishing this chapter today, and then take a break for this next week and come back to it the following week. This morning, we look again at what is the outcome of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. It was a three-year ministry, one that was full of declaration of the gospel but also full of difficulty and trial. It was a relationship with that church that Paul forged that was very important. In fact, his Letter to the Ephesians is itself oftentimes considered to be the epistle that helps us to understand what the church is, and how we are to live as a body of people, that being worked out, by and large, in Ephesus, where Paul stayed and taught. It was a difficult place, however. It was a difficult place to do ministry. It was full of idols, full of worship. And this passage tells us precisely the kind of trouble that the gospel stirred up. Acts chapter nineteen, verses twenty-three to forty-one.

About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. What an incredible drama. We need the Lord to open our eyes and our hearts, to see what we might learn. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we pray that by your Holy Spirit, you will help us to see the truths which you would call us to, truths that you call us to recognize, and truths which we need to lead us to repentance of our idolatry -- for the gospel disrupts. And, Lord, we pray you would help us to see the gospel at work in Ephesus, that we might also see it at work here. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.

You may remember Paul Bunyan's work, *Pilgrim's Progress*. The second part of the book, he's on his way to the Celestial City. And as he goes there, he has to go through very difficult places, and one of those places is a city called Vanity Fair. As he reaches the gates of Vanity Fair, Christian, who is the pilgrim who is the metaphor for the Christian and the Christian life, is worn before he goes into this city of Vanity Fair. And his companion tells him this:

Let the kingdom of God be always before you. Believe steadfastly concerning things that are invisible. Let nothing that is on this side of the other world get within you. And above all, look well to your own hearts and to the lusts thereof, for they are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Set your faces like a flint. You have all the power in heaven and on earth on your side.

And as one writer summarized, "Christian passed through Vanity Fair bloodied but pure in heart. He remembered amid hard combat with the world, flesh, and the devil, the Celestial City which was his destination, and the Lord Jesus who beckoned him to life." Paul goes into Ephesus, a Vanity Fair, as it were. He would leave the place, perhaps not bloodied, but definitely bruised -- attacked on every side, accused wrongfully, said to be preaching a false gospel, false gods. But what exactly was Paul doing? This passage tells us. It tells us specifically. We see how the gospel disrupts. We see the web of idolatry that the gospel exposes. But ultimately, we see the lordship of Christ -- what it means to follow Jesus as king.

I will finish this sermon -- as I telescope for you -- I will finish the sermon by asking you to imagine, guided by the Scriptures and the Spirit, to image the Lord Jesus entering into Jerusalem on an animal of poverty and not an animal of warfare, a horse. He came in as a King who is going to the throne by a pathway that would be bloodied, bruised, and, on the surface, looks like a complete failure. He would enter in that way, but he would exit victorious through the resurrection, that the King came to say, "I am the Lord of life, all of it." This is what the gospel calls us to, and on this day, as we remember the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us ask the question ourselves, but let me ask it to you: is he merely your Savior, or is he your Lord? Let's look together.

The gospel disrupts. We do not know specifically here based on this passage all the details of what Paul's teaching was. We know, and we can gather together because of his actions in other cities and because of what we learn from his Letter to the Ephesians, what he taught by way of the gospel. He clearly taught that Jesus Christ coming as the Son of the Living God has called us into new life; that God's purpose was to do more than just offer forgiveness, but to call us as children; that our greatest problem is not a problem of behavior, it is first and foremost a problem of the heart. Heart motives, heart desires, heart loves. And Jesus Christ came to not only offer forgiveness for how our hearts promote behavior that is sin, but ultimately to heal the ultimate problem, and that is the problem of idolatry.

Now, we know, interestingly enough, that in fact at the end of this passage, this town clerk helps us to see what Paul perhaps did and what he didn't do. Now, if you will, look again at the end of the passage. Now, this town clerk -- who was he? Well, this town clerk would have been like -- he would have been like a cross between sort of an administrator who handled financial matters, as well as, he clearly had an understanding of the law. And here's what he tells us about Paul. He confronts those who are rioting. He warns them. But in the process of warning them, here's what he says, again: "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the

sacred stone that fell from the sky?" He says, of course, we see all of these things. But then he says, " For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess."

Now, I read that sentence -- and I would encourage you to read that sentence -- and see not what is missing, but what is really there. What does that tell us about what Paul did? Paul came into Ephesus, into Vanity Fair, as it were, and he doesn't go about preaching against the goddess of Artemis. Rather, what he does is he goes about demonstrating, contending, arguing for, and witnessing to the only wise God -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Paul does not go into the city who has a temple, as I said last week, which was seven times the size of the Parthenon, as well as took nearly a hundred and twenty years to build. This was an incredible place of worship, of magical arts, and of false -- all kinds of occult worship. Paul, notice, he didn't go in saying, this is wrong, that's wrong, this is going to lead you to hell -- he doesn't say those things. What does he do? He proclaims Christ. And what happens, inevitably, is that when Paul proclaims Christ and God the Father and the power of the Spirit and what God has done to bring about redemption and salvation and to make a people for himself and to call them the church -- what is referred to here as "the Way" -- that when he does this, it inevitably disrupts all of the idol structure and frameworks within that context, within that city.

It's very interesting that we see the same thing that he did in Rome. Paul was an observer of their religions. Paul was one who studied their philosophies. But he recognized he would not get a hearing if he simply went around criticizing and belittling what they worshipped. Rather, what he did do was he contrasted that by proclaiming the utter worthiness of Christ. And when he preaches the gospel, and when the gospel is preached, it disrupts. It calls into question the practices and the heart motives that we have.

But it not only disrupts because of Paul's teaching -- it is a threat to the culture. We see here that the culture had had within it a set of practices. We know that at least Demetrius was considered to be the head of the silversmith union, if you will. He was a chief craftsman. He clearly had others working for him. He made money. And if he made money, they made money.

Now, what exactly were they crafting? What they were crafting were not statues, but they crafted small, silver, temple-like structures that people would buy when they came to Ephesus. When they would come to Ephesus, they would buy these and then take them home and use them like house temples. You see, the temple of Artemis was not considered to be her home. Rather, it was a place where -- many archaeologists believe that there wasn't a statue depicting her, though there was a statue uncovered in 1956, a very large statue of a very well-endowed woman who was Artemis, because she was considered to be the goddess of fertility both in human beings and in nature.

There was a place where you could go just outside of Ephesus to find what was considered to be her birthplace in the woods. And so hunters and the like worshipped her. People in the city worshipped her because they believed from her would come great wealth, because if you had a great family, from that family you would be able to have sustainability and an upwardly mobile life. And so one month a year, Ephesus would shut down for business, and it would be opened up for an entire month of feasting, of games, of theatre, of music, and most importantly, worship, of Artemis. And so these little silver temples were sold. Of course, as you might imagine, they haven't found any, because they were too valuable. People stole them, kept them, melted them down. Who knows where they are.

But historians have discovered that, in fact, what was taking place was a culture was completely bent on making money to keep up all the glory of Ephesus and the pride of being connected to the largest temple, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Cultural pride, cultural practices went to support this, and here's Paul coming in, as Demetrius says, "Gods who are made by hand are not gods." The only living and wise God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who came for us. This would disrupt that culture. And so the entire city is brought into riot, not because Paul was wanting to start a riot, not

because he was going around with the gospel, sticking it in people's eyes, but rather, declaring Christ. And watch what happens.

Now, here's what's interesting. I find that incredibly attractive. What I find incredibly attractive about this is because people told Paul that, quite frankly, they were sick of him. They were sick of hearing about the gospel. Do you know, that's an incredibly safe place to be? It's actually more safe than being in places where people just see the gospel as just one other among many stories, and, quite frankly, aren't interested and find it ho-hum. It's much easier, I would imagine, for someone to tell you, Paul, how dare you disrupt my life? Versus, huh, that was an interesting sermon. I find it incredibly attractive that when the gospel was preached here, it was done so for the glory of Christ, and it caused a great disruption.

But why? Yes, it was because of Paul's teaching, because of the gospel, because of the threat to the culture -- but more importantly, there was something else that it was exposing. It was exposing a web of idolatry. The web of idolatry is twofold; one is the idols from within, but also the idols from without. But it is all a web of idolatry. I'm very grateful for the professor, teacher, writer, David Powlison, who a number of years ago wrote a fascinating and incredible work on the power of idolatry, looking at it from a Biblical perspective. He writes this. He says, "Idols define good and evil in ways contrary to God's definitions. They establish a locus of control."

And here, the locus of control for Demetrius that was being threatened was his financial security. Notice, his first concern was financial security, and only secondly was he going to leverage any disrespect towards Artemis as a tool to fight Paul. But first and foremost, it was financial security. But there could be a whole host of inward idols that begin to find their locus of control. We can't dissect motivationally what was going on in Demetrius. We can only hear what his words say. His words say, if we allow this to go on, we won't make any money. And if we don't make any money, we can't keep up our lifestyles.

Now, that isn't necessarily a statue you can take home and worship. It's not like we're suggesting that somebody takes home silver and dollars and bows down before it in front of the hearth. But, rather, it's what money enables. It gives the idea of control and stability. And so I look to it. I invest myself in pursuit of it, not because it's a cute little idol that we might have in our minds and we get on our knees, but rather, in our hearts, in our ideas, in our motives, in our decisions, what are we trying to do? We're trying to amass more so that we can gain that stability. Without it, we feel discombobulated, out of kilter.

It can look like a whole host of other things. It can look like a desire for acceptance. Perhaps what that looks like is you were mistreated as a child for some way, and you long to be loved and for acceptance. And a desire to hold onto acceptance, to not be rejected, will do whatever is necessary to keep relationships working and in control. It looks like insecurity, but in fact it's pride: we don't want to be seen for who we are. And whatever we have to do to keep those relationships in place -- if we have to sacrifice our integrity, if we have to acknowledge things we like but really don't, if we have to sacrifice our own priorities, whatever they might be, so that we can keep these relationships in place because they give meaning to me -- then what becomes an idol is the other person. The other person becomes bigger than who God is. And when people are bigger than who God is, we are like a wave on the ocean. We will simply change as the context requires, or as the relationship requires. Idols are the heart are many. John Calvin would say, early on in his institutes, that, indeed, the human heart is an idol factory that produces idols that boil up within us.

But not only do idol boil up within us. Powlison says they also boil up around us. Because here's the really hard part. If our addiction, our desire, is to have money so that we can gain control, we're in a culture today and in a county and in a place that will support that idol. And if that is not your idol, you'll constantly be tempted in the Vanity Fair of the United States. Because how many articles can we go out today and look at all the major newspapers, all the major magazines at Barnes and Noble, and go and look -- and how many people are trying to give us top five ways to invest, to get more money, for our IRAs and

for our retirement? How many commercials are spent? How much money is spent to try to convince us that what we need is more money? So, if it's not your idol, you might be tempted to do it.

In other words, idols of our hearts find support from the idolatry of the culture, and they feed on one another in such a way that they become like a web. And when they become like a web, interestingly enough, what begins to happen is that more and more idols are produced -- lust, in all of its forms. Because if one idol doesn't work, let me try something else. Idol of escape: this isn't working for me, let me reject. Even those who say, I reject the monetary addiction in our culture to money, I'll go to the simple life. But see, that rejection and turning to the simple life can be as much a part of trying to gain control as the pursuit of money and things.

Let me conclude the point in this way. And on this week, I want this to be fresh in our minds. Idols are both personal and sociological. They are familial. They are ethnic. They are in every way possible temptations and false masters. And to go further to say, our greatest problem is not bad behavior. Jesus did not come to solve our bad behavior. Our chief sin is not money and idolatry of money. Our chief sin is not lust or control. Our chief sin is what is underneath all of the Scriptures, and is the deepest human problem from Genesis to Revelation, and it is this: our problem is idolatry, at its very core, is de-centering God as the center of gravity, and making it ourselves.

If you don't believe me, consider for just a moment Adam and Eve. The problem was not first and foremost that they took and ate. That was the action that began as a motive. What was Adam and Eve's sin? What was truly -- what was the fruit point at? It was that Adam and Eve desired to be like God. They wanted to de-center God as the center of gravity, and I want to be God. What Christ came to do wasn't just to offer death on a Friday afternoon so that we might be forgiven of our sins and bad behavior. No, he came as King to die on a Friday afternoon, to then be raised on the third day as a human being, fully God, fully man, fully obedient, fully righteous, seeing the Father as the only center of gravity in a way that we could not and should have.

Our problem is, at our hearts, that we want to be God. And because we want to be God, our hearts become factories of mass production of idols. And they are as varied as there are people in this room. And they are webbed together with supports in the culture, supports in your family, supports from your ethnic group that are all flung together as this incredibly difficult web of our trying to keep ourselves at the center. Because of what? Because when Adam and Eve said, you are not the center, Lord, we are, then God said, okay. And what began to happen is that Adam and Eve were completely thrown out into a place where there was no equilibrium. There was no longer a center of gravity that was full of hope and love and power before the face of God. Now they had to live life nakedly, aware of their shame. And so then what began to happen? Murder, theft, blameshifting, escaping, denying, pain of all sorts. But the lordship of Christ is the only solution.

How do we come to grips with the reality that our greatest problem isn't our behavior but from hearts that want to be like God? John Stott said it this way in a wonderful work years ago. He says, "The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone. God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."

You see, Jesus Christ came as a man to live in our place, to walk as a man, to obey as a man, to worship the Lord as a man, and to give all the glory where it belonged -- to his Heavenly Father. To be tempted in every way that we are tempted to make ourselves gods, and Jesus resisted and again turned the glory to the Father, from whom all is gift. You see, Jesus comes as Lord, and he offers us more -- let me say this. The gospel is more than unconditional love and forgiveness for the carnival of our behavioral sins. The gospel is more than unconditional love and forgiveness for the carnival of our behavioral sins. The gospel tells us that Jesus came to reassert the center of gravity where it belongs: in the Lord. And he

comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey to bring the kingdom of God to bear. And he would announce that "the kingdom of God is at hand." And what he meant is that the King has come.

The kingdom is not an abstraction. The kingdom is not a formula. The kingdom is a person, inaugurated by an act that sets God in a place that we only deserve to be, leaving a place that only he deserved to be, so that we might be called children of the living God. Isn't it amazing that from the earliest days of man saying, I want to be like God, God's message was and has been and will be until Christ's return: I know. I know. And when you are ready to acknowledge that you are tired of trying to be like me, then you may see what I have come to do is more than forgive you, but to make you completely and utterly new. To take from you a heart of stone and give to you a heart of flesh. To pour out on you the Holy Spirit. To put within you a new identity, a new name, a new mission, not for yourselves, but for the glory of the Lord.

Jesus came to be more than a Savior. He came to be our Lord. And when, by his Spirit, you begin to -- guided by the Word -- begin to ask, what idols are being produced in my heart? What idols do I look to the culture to find an excuse to plunge myself in? Is it money? Is it escape and comfort and pleasure? Is it other people's acceptance? Is it your children's success? Is it getting a certain degree? Is it getting married? Is it getting divorced? Is it finding another lover? Whatever it may be, the Lord says, I have come. Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. As I said earlier, I will repeat again: from the wonderful book of Pilgrim's Progress:

Let the kingdom of God be always before you. Believe steadfastly concerning things that are invisible. Let nothing that is on this side of the other world get within you. And above all, look well to your own hearts and to the lusts thereof, for they are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Set your faces like a flint. You have all the power in heaven and on earth on your side.

May the Lord call us to repentance of our idols, and may we find in him the Lord of Life, the center of gravity amidst the Vanity Fair. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, I ask that you, by your Spirit and Word, would work powerfully in us to give us eyes to see and wisdom to discern the idols that so easily grip us and the idolatry of self, where we want to be like you. Lord, forgive me for my idolatry. Forgive us, for our hearts are deceitful above all things. Who can understand it? Lord, we can only turn to you. And Lord, may you expose in us our deepest need, and give us our sanity back, that we might know the grace that makes us new. In Jesus' name. Amen.