

Sermon 60, The Climax of Paul's Mission, Acts 19:1-20

Proposition: Luke shows us the power of Paul's gospel of the Kingdom — power over disciples, power to make disciples, power to work hard for a long time, power to drive out evil spirits, and above all power to make ordinary disciples voluntarily obey Christ and renounce Mammon and magic.

- I. Power to Bring Separated Disciples Fully into the Kingdom, vv. 1-7
- II. Powerful Persuasion Regarding the Kingdom, v. 8
- III. Powerful Perseverance in Teaching, vv. 9-10
- IV. Power Over Sickness and Satan, vv. 11-16
- V. Jesus' Powerful Name Not to Be Abused, vv. 13-17
- VI. The Power of Voluntary Obedience to Christ, vv. 18-20

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luke shows us the climax of Paul's ministry as a free man in half-a-dozen scenes from Ephesus. Remember, Luke has compressed the events of three years into just over a single page of written material. He is not telling us everything that happened in Ephesus; he is telling us six notable things that happened there, six ways in which Paul's apostleship was demonstrated and confirmed. Notice also that here again is one of Luke's handful of direct mentions of the Kingdom of God. In addition to being the agent of the Kingdom's coming, Paul directly taught about the Kingdom in the synagogue of Ephesus.

We've come a long way from the Spirit's instructions in ch. 16 that Paul's team was not supposed to go into Asia; now, they make such an impact that all Asia hears the word of the Lord. Brothers and sisters, as we'll see next week, the Kingdom comes through weakness and suffering — but as Luke shows us in the text before us, it also comes through the powerful work and proclamation of the apostles, and specifically of Paul. We can be certain of what we've been taught about the Kingdom; just look at the six powerful Kingdom things Paul did in Ephesus.

I. Power to Bring Separated Disciples Fully into the Kingdom, vv. 1-7

The first scene here in Ephesus can be rather baffling. Is Luke suggesting that certain people need to be rebaptized? Is he saying that the baptism of John the Baptist was fundamentally different from Christian baptism? If so, of course, doesn't that mean that Jesus was never baptized as a Christian? And so on. We can really wander off into the weeds in trying to interpret this story, and in so doing, miss the point. Brothers and sisters, I don't know exactly what happened between Paul and the Ephesian disciples. Personally, I think the most problems are solved by reading v. 5 as a continuation of v. 4, as continuing to be Paul's narrative history of the ministry of John the Baptist. That way, we simply have him laying hands on these already-baptized believers who already trust in Christ, though rather ignorantly. Through the laying on of apostolic hands, these believers receive the Spirit and come out of their

redemptive-historical time warp into the new covenant era of the Spirit — the same era in which we live today.

That makes the most sense to me. If you prefer to think that they were baptized into a sect which had lost its way, though, a sort of first-century Mormonism or something, that works too. What I firmly reject along with the Reformers is the idea that these people had received a valid baptism from John and now needed another valid baptism from Paul.

Either way, brothers and sisters, or even if you regard this as a rebaptism, what is Luke's point? Luke's point is that Paul is able to take sideline groups and bring them into the mainline. Paul takes separated brethren, people who are disciples but ignorant of the Spirit, and fully integrates them into the mainstream church by giving them the Spirit. That's the point.

What, in turn, does that imply? That Paul's ministry is the real deal. He is God's pentecostal agent; through his ministry, the mission of the Holy Spirit to the people of God comes to the fruition. This giving of the Spirit is one of the signs of an apostle. In other words, as we ramp up to Paul's imprisonment and weakness as demonstrated in the final quarter of Acts, Luke first shows us Paul's freedom and power. To have the Holy Spirit in your gift is an incredible power. To have a Divine Person at your beck and call is superhuman; it is beyond anything any of us, no matter how spiritual or godly, could deserve. Paul didn't deserve it; rather, God gave him the power to bestow the Spirit as part of his apostolic calling to build the church on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Incidentally, in one sense, this chapter puts its biggest climax right at the beginning, as does the book of Acts itself. The coming of the Spirit is an event you can't top; its only parallel would have to be the return of Christ.

And so, brothers and sisters, when we see that Paul, like Peter, and like Jesus, is able to give the Holy Spirit, we should be in awe. Here is a wise master builder, laying the foundation and building up the Kingdom of God in Asia. And the most impressive way that he does that is by laying his hands on someone and thereby giving them the Holy Spirit of God.

You can only get the Spirit through the apostles — by listening to their teaching, believing in the One they proclaimed, and joining the church He founded. These twelve Ephesian disciples, like the twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles, are a reminder of the completeness and unity of the Kingdom.

II. Powerful Persuasion Regarding the Kingdom, v. 8

But Paul's power is not limited to bestowing the Spirit and making disciples of John into disciples of Jesus. He is also able to speak out boldly, reasoning and persuading about the Kingdom. Notice that he never proclaimed blind faith, never said that people should believe because it is absurd. Rather, he gave reasons, persuasive reasons, to believe that what he was saying was true.

Brothers and sisters, there is only one question the Bible commands all Christians to be able to answer. That is the question of why you have hope in you. Only an apostle could give the Holy Spirit. But every Christian ought to be able to speak, reason, and persuade regarding the Kingdom. If you can't do that, study. Learn. Practice. I met a man today who said that he routinely asks fellow Christians to give him an account of the hope that's in them. Few of them

are pleased with the question; they dislike it! Why? Probably because they have not learned the reason for their hope like they should. But the Kingdom came through Paul's continued teaching the Ephesian synagogue — three months of it.

III. Powerful Perseverance in Teaching, vv. 9-10

And then he persevered in teaching. Some were hardened and became disobedient; they publicly slandered the Christian faith. Think today of certain organizations and groups warnings against "Christian nationalism" as an all-purpose slander with which to paint sincere Christians as some sort of political danger. Paul surely by this time knew something like this was coming. He simply went to another place and reasoned there daily for two years.

That is a long time to minister; that's a lot of teaching. Even Rush Limbaugh, genius that he was, surveying the complicated and frenetic politics of the contemporary USA, was only about to talk about them for three hours a day. Yet some sources suggest that Paul went for 5 hours a day for two years!

Now in one sense, yes, that is not even close to the power to bestow the Holy Spirit of God. But it is also much more something we can identify with. The Kingdom came not only through the supercharged gifts of the apostles, but also through the ordinary daily grind with which we're all familiar. Paul worked harder than them all, he tells us. And when we read this, we believe it!

IV. Power Over Sickness and Satan, vv. 11-16

Another peak event in Paul's ministry is the overwhelming presence of God's power with him, authorizing him to speak in God's name and confirming his apostleship. Even his sweat rags retained power to heal. This does not seem to be something that accompanied the apostle everywhere he went — but in Ephesus, in keeping with the theme Luke has already established, God worked the greatest works through Paul that He worked anywhere. Even Luke, who has narrated many extraordinary things, has to call these "extraordinary miracles." Again, why mention them? Because they contribute to the theme of Paul's extraordinary apostleship. Through him, God is driving back the forces of darkness and bringing about the obedience of faith among all nations. Part of the reason we listen to Paul's letters is that we know from Acts just how mightily God worked through Paul's life as well as through his pen.

Sickness is a consequence of Satan's power, and Satan's power comes from sin. To heal sickness is to manifest the power of Christ's reign over the causes of sickness in the forces of evil. And so Paul heals sickness. And of course, to cast out demons is certainly to stand directly against the forces of darkness. Notice Luke's focus on the name of Jesus, which is mentioned in vv. 5, 13, and 17. The name represents His character — and through Paul, who Jesus is was coming to be known all over Asia.

V. Jesus' Powerful Name Not to Be Abused, vv. 13-17

Jesus got so famous that these seven sons of Sceva tried to leverage the name of God to juice up their exorcisms. Instead, they found out that the name of Jesus is not a magic charm, and His Kingdom is not something whose power can be manipulated. The Kingdom of God is the personal rule of Jesus, delivering human beings from Satan's domain. The Jewish exorcists

claimed to do the same thing, but could not. And in the same way, there continues to be no deliverance from Satan's kingdom except by the power of Christ. Again, the greatness and power of Paul is highlighted here, as the would-be exorcists appeal to "the Jesus whom Paul preaches" and the demon says, "Oh, yeah, I know Paul — and you have no business trying to invoke him!"

VI. The Power of Voluntary Obedience to Christ, vv. 18-20

Luke winds up the account of Paul's greatness in Ephesus, a greatness that is actually merely a shadow of the greatness of his King and the Kingdom he proclaimed, by showing us the power of the Kingdom to bring about voluntary obedience to Christ. Once again, Luke shows how power over money is intimately related to submission to Jesus' rule. The Ephesians were devotees of magic; much sorcery was practiced in their city. But they feared the power of Jesus' name. Those who had already become Christians seemingly had a hard time giving up their magical practices. But when they heard about the threat posed by Satan's kingdom to half-hearted submitters to Jesus' reign, they changed their minds and came and burned 50,000 silver pieces' worth of magic books.

Brothers and sisters, this was not just a victory for Paul and his teaching; it was a victory for the Kingdom of God. These Ephesians, by giving up their magic and their money, signaled that they were really and truly ready to submit to Christ. The word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing, through Paul's glorious ministry in Ephesus.

Things are about to take a nasty turn; we're going to see Paul silenced and weakened in the next section, as Luke builds up the journey to Jerusalem that parallels Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. But right here, in the first half of ch. 19, we see the apostle at his most successful, most powerful, proclaiming the Kingdom, winning converts, and driving back the forces of darkness.

You can be certain of what you've learned about the reign of Christ. Just look at what happened in Ephesus. And recognize that you have the Spirit and therefore you're on the hook to rule money rather than letting it rule you. If something is preventing you from serving Jesus completely and submitting to Him unreservedly, burn it. Get rid of it. Don't bother about how much it cost; you are better off without it. That's another takeaway. But the biggest takeaway is that the Kingdom came in Ephesus through Paul's hard work and the blessing of God on his labors. And it is continuing to come, even here in Gillette, through the same thing — the labors of the apostles and prophets, as seen through the work of believers like us. Amen.