

December 15, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

The Problem With Idols

Acts 19:11 – 41

Last week we saw how Paul began his third missionary journey by traveling through Galatia and Phrygia, ministering to the churches there, strengthening the disciples. Eventually he comes to Ephesus where he encounters twelve disciples of John the Baptist, and upon finding out that all they knew was the baptism of repentance, he preaches the gospel, they believe and get baptized and they came up speaking in tongues and prophesying. Luke then records that Paul then begins speaking in the local synagogue there, reasoning with the Jews there and persuading them about the kingdom of God for about three months. But inevitably he runs into Jewish resistance and moves to the school of Tyrannus and continues for about two years. And Luke's conclusion is that as a result – all who lived in the Roman province of Asia heard the gospel.

We might wonder at that sweeping statement if it were not for the rest of the chapter. Luke makes it clear that this gospel preaching was accompanied by some stunning miracles, and a weird little incident with some itinerant exorcists.. He says that God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul – to the extent that sweat rags used by Paul and work aprons worn by him were taken from his workroom to the sick and demon possessed and they were healed and liberated. I think we can be reasonably sure that Paul was not handing these out as if they had any intrinsic healing powers. The implication is that these items were taken without asking. Furthermore we never hear of Paul starting up the kind of prayer cloth ministry the way some televangelists do today.

The miracles attributed to Paul were a particular means God used to authenticate the gospel in that superstitious city. Ephesus was not only one of the most magnificent, but also one of the most corrupt, of the cities of the province of Asia. One historian puts it this way, 'Superstition and sensual pleasure were the order of the day. Under the shadow of her temples, criminals of every grade found shelter, and the most degrading vices flourished.' Ephesus too, was the center for the worship of their version of the Roman goddess, Diana. The fame of the magnificent temple of "Diana of the Ephesians" extended throughout all Asia and the world. Its incredible splendor made it the pride, not only of the city, but of the nation. The idol within the temple was declared by tradition to have fallen from the sky, and on it were inscribed magical, symbolic characters, which were believed to possess great power. Ephesians ate, drank and breathed magic the way that the Athenians ate, drank and breathed philosophical argument. When Paul went to Athens, he didn't heal people or cast out demons, he reasoned in the marketplace and on the Areopagus.

When the gospel encounters Ephesus, magical-looking things happen, not because the miraculous is the hallmark of Christianity, but because magic is the language of the Ephesians. God always speaks in ways that a culture understands in order to demonstrate who He is. In Athens, Paul reasons; in Ephesus, he does works of power. Furthermore Luke, describing the handkerchief event, calls it an extraordinary miracle. Like there are different classes of miracles: extraordinary ones and common ordinary every-day miracles. And maybe there are.

But at the same time, I think Luke want us to see that on the one hand, whatever magic Satan can work up, the power of God trumps him every time; and on the other hand, Christianity is not a magical technique for manipulating spiritual realities. If your goal is spiritual mastery and if you think technique is the way to go, then whatever healings and exorcisms you've heard about, Christianity is not the vehicle you want. Don't get the wrong idea from this handkerchiefs business, Luke is saying. What we have in Christ is not a magical technique.

So Luke tells us this story about the seven sons of Sceva and the demon-possessed man. The short version is that these guys were trying to work a spell on this guy and the demon sees right through them and says, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know – but who are you?'

In other words, the important ingredient here is not liturgy, but relationship. The demons know who God is, and they know who His people are, and they tremble. But all these guys had was an incantation, and they were last seen, naked and bleeding and running for their lives. But the upshot, Luke says, was that everybody heard about this, extraordinary miracles were taking place – things the Ephesians had never seen before – and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.

What that means is that the gospel was going out. It wasn't just miracles happening and demons being cast out – Luke has just told us in verse 10 that people were hearing the word of God; and in verse 20 that the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail. And seeing the miracles and hearing the gospel, people were believing in Jesus and being saved. *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.* Acts 19:17 And as always happens when the gospel impacts peoples lives, it changes them utterly: *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 fifty thousand pieces of silver.* Acts 19:18-19

You know a man has been saved when he throws his money in the fire. Probably in today's prices this would have been around a half a million dollars worth of books that went up in flames. These guys really got saved. When you start throwing your treasured possessions in the fire, that's evidence that you really understand the treasure that Christ is. And that is the singular point Luke is making in this passage. Its about idolatry versus Christ. The opposite of Christianity is not paganism – it's idolatry. And what this text shows us this morning are really three things about idols, about idolatry – the presence of idols; the paradox of idols, and the price of idols. The presence, the paradox and the price of idolatry.

First of all **the presence of idols**. Look at verse 26. Demetrius was a silversmith who made the little shrines that housed the various idols people worshiped, especially the idol of Diana, there in Ephesus. And when people started burning their magic books and quit buying the little idols and shrines, he got worried. And he probably went into the Agora, the marketplace where all the city business is done, and starts talking to everybody who made their living off these things. *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.* Acts 19:26

What this means is that Paul must have been preaching this so often and so widely that this became kind of a slogan – **gods made with hands are no gods at all**. Never mind the blinding truth of this statement, this is what got Demetrius upset. He probably never went to hear Paul himself – but everywhere he went people were saying this. It had a huge impact in the city, and had actually begun to change the economy. But what this is saying too is that when Paul preached the gospel, he frequently preached about idols. Go back to chapter 17 in Athens and we hear Paul saying: *Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.*

And I think we could make the case that you really don't understand the gospel until you realize that the gospel is always opposed to idolatry. And if you understand what the gospel says, I think you can see that Paul never preached the gospel without confronting idolatry. And to our modern western minds that sounds a bit far-fetched because in our minds, idolatry is sort of relegated to ancient, primitive, superstitious cultures of the past. We suffer from what C.S. Lewis described as chronological snobbery. 'Idols?' you say, 'We don't worship idols. We're too sophisticated to think that idols are helpful'. Really? Take a walk with me through an imaginary scene. Suppose we imported an ancient Ephesian from 2000 years ago to a huge arena where thousands of people with painted faces and magical slogans written on signs or their bodies, and dressed up like animals and birds are gathered. He watches as they ritually partake of slaughtered animals as offerings on portable altars, and then gather in the arena to raise their hands to heaven and chant mystical words in unison in hopes of affecting the outcome of the bizarre ceremony involving five high priests and their 22 acolytes in the arena below. Would this Ephesian not think that he has stumbled upon some religious ceremony honoring some beloved idol?

If that doesn't convince you, consider this. Among the Canaanite peoples of Palestine, there was a god they worshiped called **Molech**. In addition to wild sexual rituals, Molech worship included child sacrifice, or as we read in the Old Testament "passing children through the fire." These giant metal statues were made of a man with a bull's head, and typically with outstretched forearms that made a kind of ramp to a hole in his torso. A fire was lit in the statue and babies were placed in the statue's arms. If a couple sacrificed their first born, they believed that Molech would ensure financial prosperity and well-being for the sacrificer. And we say, 'That's barbaric and horrible! How could anyone do such a thing?' And yet in this country for forty years we have been offering millions of our children to this god. To paraphrase a twitter I read a few weeks ago, 'If we spent one minute in silence for each child sacrificed to the god of convenience, prosperity, and mental health, we would spend the next 100 years in absolute silence'.

Don't say that just because we don't have little images on a shelf that we don't worship idols. **Today's idols are in the self, not on the shelf.** In his 1835 book *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville talked about the habits of the heart and noted that for Americans, "equality is their idol." Among such a democratic people, he reports, "**there are certain epochs at which the passion they entertain for it swells to the height of fury.**" I think we can see this most visibly in the debate over **same-sex marriage**. No one is talking about the purpose of sexuality, or the nature of homosexuality, or especially the morality of the issue. The whole debate is framed within the confines of the idol of **equality**. And you know it's an idol because of the extreme passions this debate generates.

Because at the heart of the idol of equality is the demand for individual equality and freedom. This idol of equality means that no one has the right to tell you what you should believe or how you should behave. Borrowing on de Tocqueville's habits of the heart, a book by the same name, published in 1985, explored how Americans think about themselves and their society and how their ideas related to their actions. And in this book, the author, Richard Bellah says that at the heart of American culture is something he calls **expressive individualism**.

And when that is applied in everyday life, but most particularly in religion, Americans feel that no one has the right to tell them what they should think or do. No one has the right to tell them who God is, no one has the right to tell them what they should believe. They have their own right to shape their own spirituality, their own faith; they have the right to worship the God that they prefer. In other words, at the heart of our culture is the very thing that Paul says is wrong. You don't have the right to create your own god – **don't think that God is made by human hands**. And yet that is the very essence of what we consider to be the right of every American. So don't say that we've somehow moved beyond the worship of idols.

So what is an idol? Tim Keller gives a definition that is very helpful: **an idol is anything besides God that is functionally more important to your happiness, your identity, your hope and your meaning** – that is an idol – that is functionally your god. Idolatry is not necessarily doing bad things or worshipping bad things or simply abominable practices – an idol is often made by taking good things and making them god-things. Taking good things and making them ultimate things. Family, it's a good thing – I love my family – but my identity, my happiness, my hope and my meaning do not begin and end there. Sports in and of themselves are not bad – but when they define you, when they are critical to your happiness and well-being in a way that God is not – those are idols. The ideas of equality and freedom, economic prosperity and financial well-being are not bad things – but if they are your hope, and security and your meaning in life – they become the gods to whom you sacrifice everything.

Martin Luther said: **'That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god'**. **An idol is what you turn to instead of God to get what you want.** It's what keeps you up at night and gets you up in the morning. For the Christian, it is anyone or anything that replaces Jesus at the center of your life. The language of idolatry says, 'Yes I believe in God, but if I could only have **that**, or if I could only achieve **that**, then my life would have meaning – then I would really be happy, then I'd really have some security, then I'd really be okay'. Whatever '**that**' is, it is more important than God to you – it's a greater source of happiness, a greater definition of your identity, a bigger hope and means more to you than God. It is your god – your idol. In effect it becomes your salvation. What's yours?

For Demetrius, Artemis or Diana represented his ultimate happiness, his joy and his meaning in life. Look at what he says: *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.*" Acts 19:25-27

And look at what that did: *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.* Acts 19:28-29 And here we see **the paradox of idols**. Idols are at the same time powerful and powerless. First of all, **idols are powerful**. When you begin to touch people's idols – they get really touchy. In fact you could say that their passions swell to the height of fury. Paul's preaching the gospel and saying idolatry is wrong – he's pointing out the obvious – gods made by human hands by definition can't be gods at all. And the whole city goes up in flames. The people were enraged. You know if you try to take something away from someone they'll likely be sad, even mad. But if you try to take something from someone and it's an ultimate thing – they'll turn homicidal.

Two weeks ago in a college football game, the kicker for Alabama, Cade Foster, missed two field goal attempts and had a third one blocked. In the final play of the game, his replacement missed what would have been the game tying field goal and an Auburn player ran it back for a last second touchdown to win the game. Since then, Foster has received several death threats on Twitter. One tweet urged him to "drink bleach" and another said: "Cade Foster I'm gonna kill you and your family just FYI." Idols are powerful things, and if you come against them, people won't just be sad or grumpy – they'll go ballistic. Idols have a great deal of power and they control the people who worship them. And that's what we see here. They caused a riot in the city.

But paradoxically, as powerful as they are, **idols really are powerless**. They can't actually *do* anything. In fact the whole thing about idols is that they are lies masquerading as truth. Idols lie – they promise things that they can't deliver. And Luke shows that with this story. At the very end we get a speech by one of the city officials that works to end the riot. And essentially he says, 'You all are saying that these people are undermining the social order by preaching against idol worship; and the reality is that you are the ones that are doing that and if we don't watch it the Romans are going to come in and punish us, not them'. And what he's pointing to is the fact that they said it was the idol that was the basis of social order – and they were upset that their idol was being dethroned – but it was the idolatry and the violence of the idolaters that was upsetting the social order.

This is a narrative version of something you see all through the Bible and that is idols never give you what they promise – they actually give you the opposite. They won't give you social order, they won't give you happiness, they won't give you freedom, they will always give you the opposite. In fact, idolatry actually leads to slavery because our idols lie to us and enslave us. They tell us this is how you get happiness, this is how you get fulfillment, this is how you have meaning in life, this will give you significance, and it never does. That's why people are perverted, addicted and indebted.

Idols promise but they never deliver. Advertisers are good at promoting idolatry. Want to be like Superman. Then you need to "**Drink milk**". Do you question your value? Then use L'Oreal "**Because I'm worth it**." Do you long to be somebody, to really stand out from the crowd? Then buy Apple products: "**Think differently**." Do you want the best things in life? Then you need a **Credicard**. Do you want to experience the ultimate in life? Then drive BMW, because it is "**The ultimate driving machine**." Do you want real freedom? Then drink **Absolut**.

But the problem with idols is that at the bottom of it, they are powerless to deliver what they promise, and they exact a high price. Let's look at the last thing here, **the price of idols**. H.G. Wells, famous historian and philosopher, said at age 61: "**I have no peace. All life is at the end of the tether.**" The equally celebrated poet Byron said, "**My days are in yellow leaf, the flowers and fruits of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine alone.**" The literary genius Thoreau said, "**Most men live lives of quiet desperation.**"

Ralph Barton, one of the top cartoonists of the nations, left this note pinned to his pillow before taking his own life: ***"I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, from house to house, visited great countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up twenty-four hours of the day."***

You see, the problem with idols is that they come with a high price. A price too high for us to pay. The essence of the gospel is this: that you are saved, you are forgiven, you are justified, not by anything you do but through what Christ has done for you. But everyone without exception is trying to be saved, trying to be forgiven, trying to be justified through some other means – through something they do. Religious people try to do this through being moral and good, follow some five-step program to holiness or nirvana or whatever – that's their idol. Secular people have no other choice but to seek it out in things, in drugs or sex or work or other people. In both cases it is the same search for salvation, for forgiveness, for justification, we just don't use those terms.

We feel we must do something. Our worship of idols really is a search for salvation and so we do stuff to earn it. **Charles Spurgeon** summed it up like this when the realization of what the gospel message meant – that Christ had done everything necessary for salvation and forgiveness and justification: ***I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look! Look to Jesus and live!" what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, "Trust Christ, and you shall be saved."***

If you are trusting in anything or anyone but God to give your life happiness or meaning or significance, you won't just be disappointed, you'll be crushed. If you're leaning on an idol, someone or something other than God, either you will crush them under your expectations, or they will crush you under their imperfections. Idols exact a very high price. And the truth is, we can't pay it. And that's the good news of the gospel. Jesus paid the price for our idolatry. Idolatry is really at the heart of our sin. We are looking to other things to save us. Or we're looking to ourselves. Or we're looking to other people. But in every case we are idolizing someone or something more than God, and left undealt with, our idolatry will kill us.

You see the gospel always zeros in on our idols. In the Old Testament, when God talks to His people through the prophets about their unfaithfulness to Him, He tells them that by bowing down and worshiping other gods they are committing spiritual adultery. And the penalty for adultery is always death. And Jesus comes into the world, telling His people that they are worshiping idols – He's really hard on those who seem to have it together. They're doing good things – they're obeying the Law – but they're worshiping idols – they're counting on their good works to save them – and yet they don't even recognize the Son of God standing in front of them. And His preaching infuriates them and they grab Him one day and kill Him, because He dared to expose their idols.

We have to deal with the idols in our lives because the price to not do so is too high. We must crush the idols in our lives, or they will crush us. And on the cross, Jesus paid the price for our idolatry so He could both judge evil, and at the same time wrap His arms around us. He can end evil without ending us. But it's not enough for you to just know this – it has to go deep into your heart. Because if you have been listening at all, you know that there are idols in our hearts that have to be smashed. It doesn't matter whether you're a believer or unbeliever here today. Our hearts are prone to idols. So what do we do about it? And the answer is not, 'I'm going to start loving idols less'. That works exactly like saying, 'Don't think of elephants'. What happens? All you think of is elephants.

It is not a matter of loving idols less. It is loving Jesus more. And He's paid the price so that we can. The only way to smash your idols is to let the weight of your love and adoration and worship of Jesus crush them under its weight. Embrace the gospel and the beauty and truth and glory of Jesus will make all your idols look like so much junk.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

We thank You for Your word this morning. Thank You for exposing the idols of our hearts that we have raised higher in our eyes than Your amazing grace and glory. We confess that we are by nature idolators who seek to rule our own little worlds. O Conquering King, come in and occupy the throne of our hearts, and reign supreme. May the truth that is Jesus illuminate all that is dark in us, crush every idol that opposes You, cause our souls to breathe after holiness and bind our hearts to a deeper devotion to You. You alone are worthy to be worshiped with the white-hot passion we too often reserve for other things. Let every other love die in the wonder of Your unfailing love and mercy for sinners like us and fill our mouths with this grace to others in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.