

“The Gospel Vs. Idolatry” // Acts 19:11–41 // Sent #20

Introduction

So... I **genuinely like the movie *Frozen***. Or maybe the word is “appreciate.” I think it’s a great family movie. But, I swear, if I hear one of those songs one more time, they are going to have to check me into a mental institution. *I don’t want to build a snowman*; I don’t want to my bike around the hall... **Every time I ask my kids** what they want to watch, they say, “Frozen.” And I’m like, “Guys... let it go.”
Need to give Adon some balance: RAMBO

Some things are great until you hear them repeated over and over and over. I feel a little like that about the movie Frozen, but also our subject today... but what we are going to discuss is really the theme of the whole Bible and it is so core and essential we have to return to it over and over: **It is that the core sin of man is IDOLATRY.¹ God created us to love and worship him above all things; our sin consists of the fact that we have chosen** a bunch of things to love and worship more than God. And **the whole story of the Bible** is God challenging us in, and rescuing us from our worship of false gods.

What it means to be converted is to return to God as God. A lot of people don’t get that... They think when you come to God you are arranging a “**get out of hell**” deal with God; and in response you agree to be a little more moral and go to church... But the core element of conversion is returning to worship and love God as God. God didn’t save us just to submit to him, but to love him.

- I think I’ve used the illustration of my roommate’s dog...MAX. God didn’t create us just to obey; he created us to worship him.

¹ Moshe Halbertal, *Idolatry*, the central plotline of the Bible is God’s challenge of false gods.

If you get that, you’re going to see how the passage we’re going to read today is applicable to you. Acts 19 is the story of the gospel going into Ephesus; it challenges the most cherished false gods of the city, and the people get violent as a result.

It should mirror the story of God coming into your life: he challenges your most precious idols, and sometimes you resist violently.

- You see, sometimes people read stories like this and they think, “Well, these are ancient people... we don’t worship statues or temples like they did. They’re primitive.”
- **The gods they worship were always a means to an end.** Various gods promised power, money, sex, family stability. That was what they were really after.
- Well, we worship the same things they do. The only difference is that their worship was **overt and conscious**; whereas ours is covert and subconscious.

Each heart has its own Parthenon, and when its idols are challenged, we react just as violently.

So, that’s why this story of the gospel going into Ephesus and challenging its idols is so applicable for you.\

Plus, it’s just wildly entertaining.

First, let me give you a little must-know info on Ephesus:

- Ephesus was the **richest city** in the richest region of the Roman Empire.
 - It was the regions primary **port**—all the region’s trade come through it.
 - It was **cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic**.
- It had the **world’s largest temple**, dedicated to the goddess Artemis/Diana (nickname; what her friends called her).
 - This temple was **4 times bigger** than the Parthenon in Rome. It was one of the **7 wonders** of the ancient world.

- The statue of Artemis, the centerpiece of the temple, was carved out of a **meteorite** that fell from the sky.
- She was, the **protector of the city**, the one whom they believed guaranteed their prosperity.
- It also had the largest library in the world

Acts 19:11–41

Acts 19, Paul enters Ephesus with the gospel. (Paul not the first one there) –a guy named Apollos was... Which, I can't make this point too often: the gospel first spreads into areas as regular people, not Apostles, take the gospel in. BUSINESSMAN OR WOMAN: this what you are called to do; it's what the Spirit of God will enable you to do.)

Well, when Paul shows up, [11] And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, [12] so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Sanctified hanky ministry.

[13] Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists (saw all of this and) undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

[14] Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.

- Evidently there was this local ghostbusters squad in Ephesus called "the 7 sons of Sceva," from the firm Sceva, Sceva, Sceva, Sceva, Sceva, Sceva, and Sceva... and they think, "Well, this is pretty cool. This guy's hanky casts out demons." And so they start going up to demons and saying, "I command you to come out by the name of Jesus... whom Paul always talks about."
- One of the demons responds to them, 19:15, "Uhh... Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"
 - Talk about the ultimate diss: A demon says to you, "Bro, I don't even know who you are."
 - My question: How had they heard about Paul? Do they have staff meetings? Meet in the air? Newsletter: Hellish times. They probably just use the NYT.

When they said this, [16] And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

- Notice: Naked *and* wounded. I'm not sure why he had to say "and, wounded," because if you're in a fight where you get the clothes beat off of you, I'm going to assume you are wounded—and not just physically. If you're in a fight and you walk away without your pants, you've been wounded emotionally, spiritually, psychologically.

Let me say something very serious: If you're a spiritual person and you try to help people without knowing God then you are in serious trouble... because if this passage is true there are often spiritual forces at work!

17 "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 (description of an awakening)...¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their occult practices.¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together (A big business in Ephesus was collecting spiritual incantations in books and selling them—so they brought all their Secrets of the Dark Arts and Harry Potter books) and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to 50,000 pieces of silver." Which would have been about 7 million dollars. Big deal.

²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

Well, all of this **got the attention of a businessman** in Ephesus named Demetrius. He owned this chain of shops where they sold these little **silver statues** of Artemis, and he starts getting worried because people are turning to God and they're not buying his little statues anymore... so he gets together all the businessmen from the city and says, ²⁵ "...Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.

(In addition to making the statues, **tourism to Artemis' temple** was huge; you've got **hotels; restaurant owners; stands** where people sell little bumper-stickers: *Artemis is my co-pilot; pictures of Artemis eating the name of Darwin;*²⁶ 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." I put that in quotes, because scholars say that the way it's written, it seems to have become a slogan. This was Paul's campaign: "gods made with hands are not gods."

Which seems to me to be kind of self-evident. A god you concoct with your mind or shape with your hands is not really a god who could have created *you*. But I think the same thing whenever I talk to people who start to redefine God to be someone they like: "My God would never do that..." If you concoct a god in your mind he's not worthy of worship; the real God should be able to challenge you and offend you and make you mad and explode your categories. Otherwise, your "god" is merely a projection of yourself!

Demetrius goes on:²⁷ 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..."

Demetrius whips everybody up into a **frenzy and they flash mob** in the amphitheater... which was one of the **biggest** in the ancient world. Still exists today; holds 25,000 people. For **2 hours** it is filled with people crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

That's a crowd roughly the size of the one at the Dean Dome for the Duke game, on their feet yelling out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." One side calls out "Arte;" the other "mis."

Paul wants to go in there to speak to them, but his friends wisely keep him from doing that—"There is no sense going in there just to die."

³² 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.

Finally the crowd disperses and Paul and his friends *live another day*.

I want to show you FIVE things you need to understand about idols in your life you can learn from this passage.

I. 5 Insights Into Idols from Acts 19

A. Idols are anything that promises to us a life of security and joy apart from God.

That's what Artemis did. She was the protector and prosperer of the city. With her, they believed, they were guaranteed security and joy.

What is that in your life? About what do you think, "If that is present in my life, I'll have power and joy"? Influence; success; beauty; money; romance; fame and respect; having children? A beach house.

Idols are not usually bad things, as I often say, but good things that have become god things—things you believe guarantee you power and joy and without which you don't think can have power and joy.

- If marriage is that thing, than you believe the "good life" begins only when you meet that person.
 - **When Harry Met Sally.** In the climactic scene, Harry comes to Sally and says, "When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible." (Haven't seen it? Insert every other romantic movie ever.)
 - The message: Get this and you'll be happy.
 - The flipside: Miss this and your life is over. If **you're single right now, and really want to be married... Could you be happy and content single?** Didn't ask

if it was your preference, but could you be happy and content?

- **If so, you've probably turned it into an idol.** *If you lose a good thing from your life, you are sad; if you lose an ultimate, a god thing, you are devastated.*
- Could you be ok if you never progress in your career? What if your "big ship" never comes in?
 - ...If you never have kids?
 - If your health never improves?
 - If your work never gets noticed?
 - If you never accomplish anything on your bucket list?
 - If how you've suffered is never made right?
- **What do you think will give you security and joy apart from God, or that there's no way to have security and joy without that thing,** even if you have God?

B. Idols engage the deepest emotions in our hearts

As you can see from this story, when you threaten idolatry, people get violent. **Their idols are their lifeblood.** They are the "protectors of the city."

What is that in your life? *What is the protector of your city?* What is that thing that the idea of losing it, or never gaining it, makes you despair?

- Again, if you lose a good thing, you're sad. Lose a god thing; you'll be devastated.

I've told you before that many of my deepest emotions are connected to idols...

- Worry. Recurring fear...
- Preaching a bad sermon
- A lot of pastors are like that... I was telling a pastor once how God was teaching me... I can't. Ministry is a great place for guys with the idol of success to hide. I can't live without ministry success.
- **Some of my deepest emotions are connected to worshipping the god of success.**

Or here's another way of coming at it: Who are you unable to forgive? When you can't forgive someone, it's because what they did caused a deep resentment in you that you just can't let go; that might be because they attacked, or threatened, your idol.

- I heard a pastor tell a story of two women in his church that were **both going through a divorce**, and **both had a son** whom it was really affecting negatively. One woman was not a Christian, but she was able, through counseling, to forgive her husband and reconcile her marriage. The other woman, a Christian, was not able to forgive. **This pastor said the reason was: for the Christian woman, when her marriage had gone bad, she had really become emotionally dependent on her son.** Turned him into an idol. When her conflict with her husband began to affect that, she couldn't forgive him, because anything that messed with that threatened her to the core. She went on to divorce. She couldn't forgive; her heart was controlled by an idol.

Ironically, **idolizing something ultimately keeps you from being able to enjoy it all.** You obsess over things and can't enjoy them because you depend on them.

- **Like life preservers** you cling to. You can't enjoy a life preserver. It saves you. If you **depend on marriage**, you become a terrible, co-dependent spouse.
 - **"Not ready to date until you are ready not to date"**
- If you **depend on family**, you become really controlling. You go from sweet, loving mother, to dominating, obsessive, controlling mother. 'Am I like that?' Ask your kids.
- **NYT writer Benjamin Newgent**, "When good writing was my only goal, I **made the quality of my work, the measure of my worth.** For this reason, I was not able to read my own writing well. I couldn't tell whether something I had just written was good or bad; I needed it to be good in order to be sane. (Because I depended on it for life and worth, I obsessed about it.) I lost the ability to cheerfully appreciate how much I had liked what I had written."

- **Or do you ever notice that people who seem to have a lot of something seem not to be able to enjoy it?**
 - People most dissatisfied with money are people who usually have a lot of it
 - **Why is it that girls who develop eating disorders are usually beautiful?**
 - **A good thing has become an ultimate thing.** Robbed them of the joy because what should have been a tool became a life-saver. You worshipped something that couldn't sustain the weight of your soul.

Idols engage the deepest emotions in our heart... **If I'm doing my job right, I'm going to be challenging your idols, like Paul did, and it's going to make you mad.** If I'm not making you mad when I preach, you're not listening.

- When do I get the most criticism? Whenever I preach on money. Money is an idol to most people.

C. Idols need to be protected

Demetrius says, "We need to protect Artemis." We can't let her be deposed of her meteorite magnificence." IRONY: she was supposed to be protector! Needs to be protected.

What do you feel obsessive to protect in your life?

- **If you feel like life without good marriage is empty,** you'll obsess about it...what if I've missed my chance?
 - I obsessed for a while... what if she misses the will of God?
 - I said yes to everything. What if I miss them?
 - Some girls who obsess with this are paranoid about how they look; how old they are; maybe in high school she's a serial dater. As she grows older, she is terrified of being single.
 - If you are dependent on marriage as married, obsess yours is no good; fantasize about new marriage: premature death of your spouse

- If kids, you become clingy with your kids... we all as parents should protect our kids. But some parents, you know this... always controlling their kids' environment; what they eat.
- If money is your god, you are always worried about whether you're going to have enough in the future... how can you protect it?
 - Of course you can't give
- If reputation is your god, you have to always protect your reputation.
 - Make sure you get the credit.
 - No one can ever criticize you

D. Idols demand sacrifices to keep them happy

- The whole system in Ephesus was built on appeasing Artemis. Making sure she was not displeased. *Idols are always like that.* They say, "If you want me, you have to sacrifice for me."
 - **When a guy cheats at his business...** and sacrifices his integrity, it typically is not because he is a compulsive liar; he just needs to sacrifice his integrity to get the money he wants.
 - *Breaking Bad.* For power. And money.
 - Love of money is the root of *all kinds of evil.* Root idol.
 - Me: **Generally a truthful person.** Lying to get affirmation.
 - **Many girls who are dating a non-Christian,** aren't doing it because they *want to tie themselves to a non-Christian guy and have that guy raise their kids...* I ASK THEM... they simply can't stand the idea of being alone, and so if they have to circumvent God's will to get a man, so be it. **Same with a lot of girls right now living in immorality** with their boyfriends... aren't doing it because they have sex drives they can't control; but because they need the god of affection and love and this is the means to that end.
 - **Those Christians in our church who won't obey God in their finances...** It's not that they're just really stingy

people; just that obtaining their idols of comfort; beach house; demands they not give to God right now.

- **We have a lot of people who worship the god of an ideal family, which is why they refuse to entertain the idea that God might send you or your children overseas...** people in church.
 - For some of you it's why **you** won't entertain the idea of adoption or fostering, because it messes up the ideal you've always had for family.
 - *You sacrifice obedience to god on the altar of an ideal family.*
- **Many people worship the god of personal comfort:** anything that makes them uncomfortable, they are not going to do... whether that is going on a mission trip or serving here on the weekend.
 - Got a guy who worships the god of comfort and his wife annoys to him... easier without her. Sacrifices his family, integrity, his relationship with his children to retain his idol of comfort.
- **You sacrifice for the idol, and it demands more and more...** William James: Success is a "bitch goddess"... constantly wants more and more. Wants time with your family. Then your health. Then your integrity.
 - **Ancient gods required child sacrifice.** We say, "How could they?" Don't we do the same? Many of us sacrifice our children to the gods of success... you're not there for your kids because you have to be successful. You couldn't imagine life being good without being successful, so if kids get in the way of that... you'll pursue your idol and let your kids pay the price.

E. Idols are not just psychological forces; they are demonic ones as well.

- We see that fully on display in Ephesus. Wherever idolatry is rampant, so are demons.
- **A tragedy is that we fail to recognize spiritual forces at work because in our day Satan has figured out he can do more damage by keeping himself cloaked than by overt terror.**

- **Satan preaches the same lie in every idol** that he preached to our first parents in the forbidden fruit: if you obtain this, you'll be like God (you'll have secured and infinite power and joy) and "you'll never die."
- *About what has he said that to you?*

II. How the gospel confronts our idolatry

Paul preached a gospel with 3 major points:

A. The true God alone gives life.

- He's a god, Paul says, not made with hands; he's the Creator of all.
- **His love** is more faithful, more tender, and more fulfilling than romance; **his promises** are more secure and more reliable than money; **his presence** is more life-sustaining than creature comforts; **his future** more fulfilling than fertile family, **his attention and affections** better than the praise of people.

Jeremiah 2:13, "My people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters; and have hewn for themselves cisterns which can hold no water."

- The **first is a sin against God**: you forsook your first husband! God created us to love him! We forsook that.
- The **second is a sin against you**: you have depraved yourself of true joy.

B. The true God doesn't need you to protect him; he protects you.

- King David: *I will love you, O Lord, my strength, my rock; my refuge, my fortress.*
- *The Lord my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?*
- I **don't need to obsess** about romance, money, or success. I trust you; I rest in you; YOU will worry about those things. **Isa 26:2**

C. The true God offered his own sacrifice.

- Money and success say, “If you don’t do enough to obtain me, and if you miss out on me, I’ll make you miserable.”
- Jesus says, “You did fail me... and I cursed myself for you.”
 - Where other gods say, “If you fail me, I’ll destroy you.”
Jesus said, “You failed me, and in love I saved you!”

Hosea presents Israel as an unfaithful people who have given themselves to idols. God compares them to a prostitute who has given herself away to countless lovers. God says, I ought to divorce you forever... **but I will bring you back.** And **he did that by** taking her shame and curse onto himself at the **CROSS.**

Illus. White dress.

Tim Keller: “Jesus is the only God whom, when you obtain him, will satisfy you, and when you fail him will forgive you.”

Have you returned to God as your God? I know many of you have prayed a prayer... but have you returned to God as your God?