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Acts 19:23-41

Outward Church:

Power Part 2. Economic Power

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“Power is the ability to make something of the world.” Paul first introduces religious power in Acts 19 when he is in Ephesus. As Paul was doing ministry there God, was doing something powerful.

Acts 19:11-12 (ESV)

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.

God was doing amazing things in Ephesus, people were being healed and others were coming to faith in Christ. But this led to some who tried to imitate Paul. It led to some who wanted to take advantage of Paul’s power for their own financial gain. A group of Jewish exorcists called the seven sons of Sceva attempted to cast out a demon in Jesus’ name and Paul’s name. But when they did this, it didn’t go well. They didn’t know Jesus, and the demon knew that.

Acts 19:15-16 (ESV)

¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all^[d] of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

These guys tried to cast out a demon in Jesus’ name, but they didn’t know Jesus, and the demon cast them out instead of them casting the demon out. And this has a huge effect on the city, a place of occult practices.

Acts 19:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ 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.

The new believers brought their books together and burned them, a huge fortune going up in flames. Imagine paying 150 people full-time salaries for a year. That’s how much money they burned up. Paul has challenged the religious powers by preaching the gospel, but that challenge has implications for the economic powers of his day. Their whole economy in Ephesus is built on the intertwining of religion and business. To question one, leads to questioning the other.

As we think about our own lives, the religion we participate in, and the economic systems we ascribe to, I hope we will shine them under the light of God’s Word to see what they really are. You ever see one of those lamps that also has a magnifying glass in it. You can use them for sewing or threading needles. They’re kind of funny because if you look through them the reverse direction your nose looks really big. My mom had one of those growing up and I loved to look through it. You could look at smaller objects under a lot of light. It exposed what was there.

What the Bible does is shine the light of the gospel on the religious and economic system in Ephesus.

The light of the gospel:

Paul preaches the gospel, and God moves to bring back the curtain, and expose what's underneath. It's painful for Ephesus, but it leads to the salvation of many. I wonder if we could do the same thing today. If we could pull back the curtain on our own religious and economic systems, and shine the gospel on them. It's no fun to have someone shine a bright light in your face, but it wakes you up if you were sleeping. How does the gospel expose the religious and economic powers at Ephesus? **The light of the gospel:**

Exposes the intermingling of false religion and money. (v21-27)

We shouldn't be surprised when a riot erupts in Ephesus. Paul has been going around preaching the gospel message. People are starting to following Jesus and become disciples. They burn their treasury of books. That would have made headlines, "Town library burns priceless collection costing millions of dollars due to recent gospel crusade!" But that's just the first of many fires, as slowly more and more people come to faith, and less and less people participate in the economic systems of the city.

Much of this city's power is based on the two working together. Above the city on a rocky outcropping sat the temple of Artemis. Last time I mentioned that it is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. That's because of its sheer size. It was at least twice the size of the Parthenon in Athens. It had 127 columns that were each 4 feet in diameter and 60 feet high. It had a decorative frieze (painting/molding) that depicted scenes from their gods and inside was a statue of Artemis that people could pray to and offer offerings to for fertility, childbearing, and a good crop. The temple also functioned as a bank and a place to eat the sacrifice.

Silversmiths like the one in our story, Demetrius, would create silver replicas of Artemis, little shrines for pilgrims and worshippers to take home. I traveled to the great wall of China a couple summers ago, and at the bottom of the wall you could buy food and drink and any sort of item you wanted. They had a lot of magnets and other items with Chairman Mao's face on it. You could go to the great wall, admire China's power, and then take a reminder of that power home, a picture of Mao. But, if over time, sales of Chairman Mao began to drop, the shopkeepers would take notice. They could either try something new, or call on the government to address the problem. That's what Demetrius does. He gives an impassioned speech:

Acts 19:25b-27 (ESV)

"Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 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.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, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

Demetrius is well aware that Paul's mission is not a localized mission, but all of Asia is hearing the gospel. There's a national movement and he's afraid for not only his personal wealth, but the economy. And if they don't do something, not only will they lose money, their goddess Artemis will be dishonored, and they can't have that. Demetrius shows that his religion isn't a true religion, but it's dependent on money, on wealth.

When I preached on religious power, I told the story of Rabi's conversion from being a Hindu guru to becoming a Christian. One of the things that God used to convict him was how poor people would come and give him offerings and would get nothing in return. He grew in wealth. He got lots of money. But the poor just seemed to get poor. Gurus like him did nothing without pay, and it convicted him. It's easy to look outside Christianity, but let's open the door to our faith. How might money be corrupting our religion?

Go no further than the Instagram channel *Preachers N Sneakers*. The creator of this Instagram channel began to wonder how come he saw so many pastors in designer clothing. For example:

1. He questioned Steven Furtick's choice of \$965 sneakers.

2. He made us wonder if a \$450 Gucci belt really does make a better worship leader.
3. He asked if Pastor John Gray really should wear \$5,611 Red Octobers.

Apparently, I've been shopping at the wrong store. Would Jesus wear sweet kicks? Would Jesus call us to pick up our crosses, follow him, and pick up a pair of air-Jordans? But I doubt many of us are Hindu gurus or going to be featured on Preachers N Sneakers. But that doesn't mean we're blameless.

I listened to a Holy Post Podcast episode entitled The Evangelical Industrial Complex where they talked about how the Christian publishing industry often publishes those who are famous, or have big churches, but ignores faithful small-town pastors who have years and years of wisdom. They told one story of a reporter actually calling out a mega-church pastor for plagiarizing, and then her radio station told her to apologize. Turns out the radio station and that author's Christian publishing house had a lucrative business partnership. They weren't saying that all Christian publishers are bad, but when there's a loss of integrity, and keeping Christ first, that's when things fall apart. One of the hosts said, "The problem is when we take good things, like money or status or influence, and make them into ultimate things." That's idolatry, and that's what happens at Ephesus.

The light of the gospel comes along and exposes the intermingling of false religion and money and it...

Exposes the heart's love of wealth. (v28-34)

Look what happens when Demetrius finishes his speech. The people get enraged! There's nothing to tick people off like messing with their finances.

Acts 19:28-29 (ESV)

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" ²⁹ 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.

Now is this so hard to imagine? Based on town meetings here in Westford where the issue of spending more money comes up, I don't think so. The crowd rushes Paul's friend, since Paul isn't there, and drags them into the amphitheater, a stadium that could hold 20,000 people built into the side of a hill. Paul tries to go in but his friends won't let him because they figure he'll be killed. And things just get more out of hand.

Acts 19:32-34 (ESV)

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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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!"

It was so loud and uncontrolled that some of the people who were there didn't even know why they were there. And when one of the local Jews did try to speak, the people shouted him down because he was a Jew, and Jews only believe in one God. He's part of the problem so they won't listen to him. And so they scream and shout for two hours.

Do you see what the gospel has done? It has exposed the heart's love of wealth. If the gospel pulled back the cover on your heart, what would it find? Would it find a love of money? Of wealth? Of wanting more and more and never being satisfied? Christians at Ephesus repented and we should too. Earning money is not wrong. Trying out a new business idea is not wrong. But when our hearts begin to love those things, and they consume us, we're quickly approaching idol territory. I wish Jesus hadn't said this.

Matthew 6:24 (ESV)

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.

Why Jesus, did you have to be so convicting? Because he knows what’s best for us, to root out our idols, even if it’s painful. Did you know this is one of the reasons we as Christians practice the spiritual discipline of giving tithes and offerings? That’s right. When we put money in the plate or give online that is a spiritual discipline. Don’t worry, it doesn’t fund my air-Jordans! It funds my Reebok CrossFit shoes... Please don’t take a picture of my feet while working out. But the reason we give to a charity or to the church is to tear our heart’s vice-like grip away from money. We need a regular practice to do so, or we’ll sit and watch our bank accounts grow and feel comfortable and safe and the grip will start to clamp down once more. The light of the gospel exposes the heart’s love of wealth.

Gives us an entirely new economic system. (v35-41)

At the end of the chapter the town clerk gets up and quiets the crowd. He makes four points:

- 1) Artemis is a great goddess; we don’t need to worry about her. (v35-36)
- 2) The Christians have not been sacrilegious or blasphemed Artemis. (v37)
- 3) Demetrius and his crew can go to the courts to make their case. (v38)
- 4) If you cause a riot, Rome will be displeased; and when Rome is unhappy, no one is happy.

This quiets the crowd down and they go away. That’s how the story ends but I want to take a step back and look at Paul and the gospel’s impact on Ephesus from a bigger viewpoint. When Paul brought the gospel message of Jesus Christ to Ephesus, it led to the destruction of part of an economic system that promoted idolatry, and that made those who benefited economically from the idolatry very mad.

As believers, we don’t live in Ephesus, but we do live in a specific time and place. We live in America under a capitalistic system. As Christians, we need to make sure that our ultimate allegiance is not to capitalism, socialism, communism, or any other economic system, but to Jesus Christ. We’ll know if we’re doing that if we’re willing to both appreciate the benefits of our current economic system, but also hold it up to critique.

As part of the Ockenga Program, I read the book, [Redeeming Capitalism by Kenneth Barnes](#). Kenneth was one of our cohort leaders. He argues that historic or traditional capitalism has been based in virtue much more than the capitalism of today. Barnes calls today’s capitalism “postmodern capitalism,” that is rooted in the idea that there is no ultimate truth or good. He argues that we need to “redeem Capitalism” by re-introducing virtue into it, faith, hope, and love, and seeking the common good. A [summary of his book](#) reads:

Traditional capitalism was driven by self-interest—defined as a willingness to do something of value for others while also securing the things that benefit oneself. In other words, our self-interest, or pursuing and using our own gifts, talents, and resources, informs how we will be useful to others. Yet postmodern capitalism blurs this once-clear difference between self-interest and pure greed, and over the long haul, a system operating outside any moral constraints cannot possibly be sustainable.

As Christians, we need to think about ways to re-introduce virtue into our systems that we are a part of. How can you make your economic system, the one you contribute to, more virtuous and wise? When Paul preaches the gospel, it not only saves sinners, it begins to redeem a sinful city and system. In conclusion:

The light of the gospel:

- **Exposes the intermingling of false religion and money. (v21-27)**

- **Exposes the heart's love of wealth. (v28-34)**
- **Gives us an entirely new economic system. (v35-41)**

What the gospel does is exposes what's inside our hearts and re-orient us to God. We are so greedy and selfish Jesus had to die for us. But we are so loved and cherished Jesus chose to die for us. That transforms us; and as we interact with a fallen world, it transforms our world too. The Son of God became poor to give us the riches of heaven. Will you receive it? Do you want your heart to love God or money? Do you want to be part of a new economic system that prioritizes sacrifice and generosity over profit and greed? That's what we get to be as the church. We get to show that God's economy is greater than anything the world can offer.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What is power?
2. How do religion and money both have power?
3. What is the gospel and how does it correct our love of power?
4. In what ways does the gospel expose religious and economic power?
5. How does the gospel give us a new way to operate?

Sources

For part one of this series, [click here](#).

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