

## Acts 19:18-41

### The Gospel and Idols

**Introduction:** We are looking at Acts which is the history of the earliest Christians and it is a major tool for our understanding as the Church and for the greater society to know and understand authentic Christianity; the real vs the watered down, compromised or nationalized Christianity. At Refuge Christian Fellowship we want the real thing. We want the real Gospel and the real Jesus. We want authentic Christianity.

In our studies Paul has come to the city of Ephesus and God has opened up amazing doors in Ephesus for the Gospel. Ephesus was the gateway to Asia - it was a place of economic power, religious power and magic power. We were told that unique miracles and signs (Of the the kingdom of God, and his power) were being done by Paul. Even his handkerchief bring healing to those who were sick. Not only that but through Paul's preaching and teaching ministry, that lasted two years, many converted to Christianity from the dark arts and pagan practices.

Luke records, **"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. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."** The People of Ephesus, and the surrounding region, had seen, heard and experienced a greater than they had every known in the good news of Jesus Christ - therefore they cut their ties with paganism and the past in order to follow him.

Luke shows us that Paul, through his preaching of the Gospel, has upset the economic, religious, and magical powers of Ephesus and one man in particular wants blood.

Paul is accused before the merchants and fellows idol makers by Demetrius. Demetrius is a very successful businessman, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis. He accuses Paul of spreading his message of the gospel and undermining their pagan influence. He says, **"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.persuading and turning away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.”**

Demetrius is probably not someone who went to hear Paul, he is a committed Idolater and in the idol business, but it's interesting to note that he was familiar enough with what Paul taught and preached to summarize part of his message... **“gods made with hands are not gods” Pretty sound logic - if humans make something with their hands it is not really a god, it is not divine...**And Paul's message had a huge impact on Ephesus and the surrounding area so much that it had changed the economy.. But from what Demetrius tells us we can conclude that Paul always preached against Idolatry and the Gospel as opposed to idolatry..for the last three or so chapters Idols have been the subject of Paul's preaching, and if you look at Acts overall when Paul speaks to a non-jewish or non-christian audience his subject is always the Gospel against Idols, or the gospel as opposed to idolatry.. Which means for us then - if we haven't thought about the Gospel in terms of challenging idolatry or thought about sharing the Gospel with the non-christian culture around us in terms of confronting Idols we are missing a huge aspect of the gospel. Confronting Idols was and is a huge part of gospel preaching and gospel living.

## **1. The Prevalence of Idols**

1. We may think preaching against Idols is out of date - we live in a secular culture, not a religious culture. We don't have temples of sacrifice and worship, we don't have statues or images that we bow down to but there is actually no better way to understand the state of the US except through the lens of idolatry.
2. I would, and will argue that America is filled with idolatry but just consider even American idealism - no sovereign, we rule over ourselves, we praise individualistic freedom, the right to choose for ourselves to be under no obligation or authority but our own (which the original founders saw as an obligation to no authority but God, but now has been thrown out)... Listen again to Paul - Self made

gods (Even the god of self-determination and individualism) are no gods at all. In actuality America and western culture is not just filled with idolatry but is built on the premise of idolatry.

### 3. What is Idolatry?

1. Idolatry is valuing anything more than God.
2. It is getting your meaning, identity, purpose, your sense of value and worth in anything other than God.
3. Tim Keller defines idolatry as, “Anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.” -TK  
Counterfeit Gods
4. Obviously idolatry can be bad things like drug addiction or alcohol abuse, but most of Idolatry is about taking good things and making them ultimate things (even religion can be an idol). Anything in this world can be turned into an ultimate thing - a kind of salvation, a source of our hope and meaning...
5. As we read through the book of Acts we've talked about the various god's of the Greek and Roman world - the god of war and the god of sex, the god of commerce and the god of travel, the god of art, the god of nature, the god of work and the god of play, the god of beauty and the god of agriculture. We might try to dismiss this idolatry and deification of these things as primitive superstition - One person said that the ancient world was overt about something that we are covert about, they were conscious about what we are unconscious - and that is that anything can be turned into a kind of salvation, a source of hope and meaning. Idolatry is as prevalent in our society today as it was in the ancient world, we worship all these same things, we just call it something else.
  1. “There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it JC or Allah, be it YHWH or the Wiccan Mother Goddess, or the Four Noble Truths, or

some inviolable set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.” - David Foster Wallace

6. Whether it is our family - pleasing our parents or storing all our hopes in dreams in our children, our beauty or physique, our sex life and sexuality, our education or hobby, our political cause or our career - we turn good things into ultimate things and look to them for a kind of salvation - meaning, purpose, identity, hope, and ultimate joy and that is idolatry. We might not physically bow down to these gods but we sacrifice time, money, resources, our children, the best years of our lives, our strength, our bodies. These passions, no matter how pure they begin, become all consuming,

## **2. The Problem with Idols**

### **1. They are powerful but weak**

1. Idols are powerful because of how prevalent they are and how powerful their allure but they are weak in the sense that they cannot deliver, and that they constantly feel threatened. Guaranteed ,if you challenge the authority of the idols in your life, you will begin to feel anxious, worried, doubtful about your identity, and worth, your talent or beauty - this is because you are no longer feeding the idol and it is feeling threatened - By the way - there are spiritual powers behind these idols.. principalities and powers...
2. Remember none of these things that we are talking about are bad things to have or want in and of themselves. But when they become ultimate things, an end in themselves- they have life

destroying power, we're giving them power and status they were never meant to carry. When you build and base your life on the foundation of relationships, possessions and status, your life begins to fall apart, and separate because the foundation and purpose of your existence is too small, it's too weak, you need something bigger, something greater..

3. They promise freedom but they enslave, they always take and never give. Idolatry, the things that we worship, promise us peace, rest, a kind of justification and acceptance, love and satisfaction, but they leave us anxious, obsessive, envious, and resentful. Why? Because like Wallace says, you can never completely live up to your idols demands, you can never satisfy it's hunger and eventually it will eat you alive, it will consume you - even if at this time in your life you feel that you are beautiful, strong, creative, cutting edge, one day you won't be, you will grow old and out of date and you won't be able to keep up the demands of the idol you're serving....Also, if you fail these idols, and you will, they cannot forgive you, absolve you from guilt or pay for your sin..
4. Paul tells us in Romans 1 that the problem (All the evil, pain, suffering, human selfishness) with the world is that we worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator - we think that creation was meant to satisfy, rather than to simply enjoy. And when it doesn't satisfy, we hoard and greedily gather, we cheat one another, we use and exploit one another for our own pleasure, satisfaction or security- we sin against one another and against God....
5. Augustine so wisely says, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you," or like Lewis says, "God made us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on petrol, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion.

God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there.” - C.S. Lewis - Mere Christianity

6. This is why we are restless, this is why we are dissatisfied, this is why we are anxious, this is why we are insecure, this is why we get angry and jealous, and lash out, this is the root to all of our problems - we think that life, true satisfaction, purpose, identity is found somewhere, in someone, or in something other than in God alone. God alone is the the perfect place of peace that cannot be disturbed! Oh how we need God, and not just God, but how we need him to rule over us and order our lives for us so that we might truly understand and experience true life and freedom.

### 3. What Can We Do?

1. **Love God more, right? Do what we know is right and is best for us, just like the pastor says.** But sin, and idolatry is like heroine, it's like a drug, it's an addiction and bondage. We love and crave it yet simultaneously hate it. It has your heart, it has your affections and emotions. And actually the answer is NOT to stop loving your family so much, or stop working so hard at your job or whatever it might be... some people take that gnostic approach, stop loving your family so much, stop enjoying life so much, pull back, remove yourself... this is not the answer that the Bible gives.
2. We do need to love God more, we should love God above all else, he continually gives out of his fulness and does good to humankind, he blesses us with life and breath and health, with food, and jobs, with friends and family with love and joy and the list just goes on... the problem is we can't - we are enslaved to our love of idols and we need to be rescued.
3. **The Gospel** then, is once again a message of great news, joy and hope - For God has sent Jesus, his one of a kind son, on a rescue mission to set us free from the idols that enslave us - Jesus death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin, but it was also the victory of God over the powers that have held humanity in bondage for thousands of years -it says when Jesus died on the cross that he put to shame all the powers of darkness all the spiritual powers behind our idols we're conquered and defeated at the cross. Jesus

alone can set us free from the Idols of our hearts that rule over us as task masters.

4. Now back to us - for a moment, what is our part? Maybe we know and believe what Jesus has done but we still feel trapped and enslaved to idols, what then? Thomas Chalmers, the 18th century Scottish Presbyterian pastor, talked about idols and personal transformation. He said, "There is not one personal transformation in which the heart is left without an object of ultimate beauty and joy. The heart's desire for one particular object can be conquered, but it's desire to have some object is unconquerable. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one."
5. The only way to be set free from the enslaving work of Idols is to set your heart completely on Jesus - Don't you see all of the things that you are looking to to give you meaning and purpose are wonderful things - but they aren't ultimate - they will fail you, and you will fail them..maybe they already have and still your holding onto them - "Beliefs that let us down are prophetic whispers, saying, "Don't you see where this is going?" Ray Ortlund Jr
6. Only Jesus will love you even when you fail him and forgive and bless you even though you don't deserve it - that's exactly what he did on the cross.
7. Think on him again and again. Make the the work of the cross the greatest passion and focus of your life. See in him the greatest beauty, the most ultimate power, his immeasurable worth - only Jesus is ultimate enough, powerful enough, amazing enough, beautiful enough, and faithful enough - to dispel our love for anything and everything else. We need the expulsive power of a greater affection to free us from our idols and only Jesus Christ can give that to us; Only his love and beauty are that ultimate.