

A Dangerous Gospel?

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[0 : 0 0] Our reading this evening is from the New Testament, from the book of Acts, Acts chapter 19, verse 21 to 41.

And Paul Brennan will be speaking to us from God's Word later on. At the start of this chapter, the Apostle Paul arrived in the city of Ephesus.

He was proclaiming the gospel and teaching, and his ministry was authenticated, confirmed to be true by God, performing many miracles through him. This was met by a remarkable response. Many came to saving faith in Christ.

Many who practiced sorcery burnt their scrolls at great cost as a result of their new allegiance to Christ. That leads us to reading in verse 20 that the Word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

And that's where we pick up our reading in Acts 19, verse 21. And we're reading to the end of the chapter. Hear the Word of the Lord. Now, after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.

[1 : 2 1] And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. About that time, there arose no little disturbance concerning the way.

For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together with the workmen in similar trades and said, 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.

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 theatre, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel.

[2 : 4 2] But when Paul wished to win among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theatre.

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. Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward.

And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make an offence to the crowd. 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!

And when the town clerk had quietened the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is a temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?

Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here, who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

[3 : 54] If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another.

But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.

And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. Amen. And this is God's word. Well, please have in front of you Acts 19 open.

And we'll be thinking about this dramatic conclusion to Paul's time in Ephesus. So Acts 19 and from verse 21 there.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Is the gospel, is the message of the gospel, is the Christian faith, is it something beautiful and good, or is it something disruptive and dangerous?

[5 : 18] Is the Christian faith, is Christianity, something good or dangerous? See, the gospel message is news about Jesus Christ, about who he is, about what he's done.

But it's also a call to take heed of the implications of who Jesus is and what he did. It is not news to quickly read over and then move on to something else.

No, the gospel is the news about Jesus and the call to respond. Because a response must be made by all of us to the gospel. And the call that is commanded in the scriptures is to repent and believe in Jesus.

The gospel is news that disrupts and changes people. It is news that alters destinies, not merely for the remainder of our earthly lives, but for all eternity.

The gospel is a call to radical transformation. And because that is the nature of the message of the gospel, it is therefore a message that will undoubtedly ruffle feathers.

[6 : 34] It must be, wasn't it? The gospel challenges. And for some, the call of the gospel is beautiful.

It is the call from our heavenly father, the creator of the universe, the one who gives us our every breath. And he calls us to turn away from our sin, to repent of our rejection of him, to turn to him and enjoy him forever.

For some, that is a beautiful thing. It's the call of life. But for others, the gospel is the stench of death. Some see it as a danger.

A danger because it threatens the very essence of who they are. It threatens the very false gods that they worship. And for many in our world, Christianity and Christians, they're the bad guys.

They're a threat. They're dangerous. And it's that sort of opposition, that sort of opinion, that's at the very heart of what we see here in Acts 19.

[7 : 50] Notice what Demetrius says there in verse 27. He says 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.

The danger of the gospel, as expressed by Demetrius, is a threat to his false goddess. And by implication, a threat to his very identity, who he is.

The gospel was a challenge to him and to many others there in Ephesus. You see, the gospel is the most basic challenge there is to our whole way of life.

To every single human being on this earth, when they hear the gospel, it is a threat to how they've been living. The first time we heard the gospel, it was a threat to how we were living.

We were going our own way, doing our own thing, living as we pleased. And suddenly, the God of creation calls upon us to repent and turn to him. That is a threat, isn't it?

[9 : 02] It's not a threat to our own way of life.

It impels a challenge at a man's very way of life. It disputes it and outrightly summons him to a radical change. And because that is so, because that is at the very heart of the gospel, kickback is inevitable.

And kickback is what we see here in Acts 19 in a very vivid way. You see, Paul has been preaching about the Lord Jesus in Ephesus. And the Lord Jesus is doing things in Ephesus.

Lives are being transformed, some to eternal life. Some have been transformed to eternal joy because they turned, repented and believed. But others are being hardened into resistance.

And we know that to be the case, don't we? It's not just unique to Ephesus. You see it all the way through Acts. We see it today. I've seen it this past week in the life course.

[10 : 29] For some, it's the call of life. To others, no thanks. The gospel always does that. And that's what we see in our passage this evening.

For some, it's a call of beauty. For others, the gospel is dangerous to be opposed. The gospel ruffles feathers unavoidably.

We'll take this in three scenes. Scene one, verses 21 to 27. The dangerous gospel disturbs. That's the thing we see in the first scene. Verses 21 to 27.

The section begins innocuously enough, doesn't it? But what we have in there in verses 21 and 22 is really a summary statement of all that's to follow through the rest of the book of Acts.

We see here what Paul, the apostle, is planning to go and do next. He resolves to go through Macedonia and Achaia to go to Jerusalem. And then once he's been there, he's going to set his sights on Rome.

[11 : 28] And that's what we see playing out through the rest of the book of Acts. And he sent off Timothy and Erastus ahead of him. But Paul stays in Ephesus for a bit longer.

And it's around that time that things kick off in Ephesus. And it begins with this chap called Demetrius. Verse 24.

A man named Demetrius. A silversmith. And his job, or at least part of his job, was to make silver shrines of Artemis.

He would make little figurines of the goddess Artemis. That was his job. That was his living. And Artemis was a goddess and she was a huge deal in the city of Ephesus.

She was, so the legend goes, the mythical daughter of Zeus and Leto. And there was, in Ephesus, a massive temple to Artemis.

[12 : 32] It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was more than double the size of the White House, I'm told to believe. It was a massive building. It took pride of place in the city of Ephesus.

It dominated the skyline. It dominated the hearts of the Ephesians. It dominated the economy. And that is clear.

As Demetrius calls together a meeting of the silversmiths of Ephesus guilds. He calls them together. Verse 24, 25. You see, the whole cult of Artemis is a major source of business and income for these idol makers.

He's up front about that. Verse 25. Men, you know that from this business, we have our wealth. Their wealth comes from making little idols.

The false god, Artemis, they make little false idols that people come and buy. And there's a big threat to their bottom line. Verse 26.

[13 : 39] He says, you see. And here, they're not only here 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.

Do you see what's been happening? The gospel, Paul's been preaching and the gospel has taken root. It's taken hold in Ephesus and the surrounding areas to such an extent that it's threatening a key trade associated with the worship of the false god Artemis.

People's lives are being gripped by the gospel. They're being turned around. And so, obviously, they're going to stop worshipping this false god. They're going to stop buying these silver idols.

And that's going to hit Demetrius' bottom line, isn't it? His trade is drying up in front of his eyes. That's why people are repenting and believing in Jesus. And the fact that people are doing that, the fact that the gospel is taking root, that impacts how people actually live and how they behave.

And they are returning. They are turning away. They are rejecting false gods. They are rejecting Artemis. They want nothing more to do with Artemis because it's a false god.

[14 : 58] It's not really there. As Demetrius says, it's literally something they make with their hands. And Paul is exposing that for what it really is. And anything that threatens the cult of Artemis, that's going to threaten Demetrius and all his friends.

That's going to hit their pockets. They're going to feel that. The gospel presents a threat to their economy, to their wealth. And when the gospel presumes the challenge, vested interests of whatever kind, either business or personal life, trouble always lies ahead.

See, the gospel doesn't leave things unchanged. The gospel requires transformation. And when the gospel messes with idolatries and sinful practices, things kick off.

When the gospel took hold in the life of William Wilberforce all those centuries ago, he could not countenance the horrors of the African slave trade.

His Christian faith brought him to the point where he had to do something. But what opposition he encountered to his plans to make illegal slavery.

[16 : 28] Huge vested interests were arrayed against Wilberforce and his colleagues. It took decades to see the implications of his convictions on the statute books.

Decades. There was so much money tied in with the sinfulness of that slave trade. And the gospel will sometimes challenge in such a way as to threaten profit margins.

And the world will not have it. Consider just some of the issues of our day. Where there are huge vested interests. Think about the beginning of life and the end of life.

The money involved in the abortion industry. And think about the legislation that is coming our way for euthanasia, end of life.

There is money tied up in that. And when the gospel challenges those things, cue outrage. Kickback will come. And that was certainly the concern of Demetrius and his pals.

[17 : 40] But that wasn't really going to gain traction with the rest of the populace. Who cares about Demetrius and his wage? That doesn't really impact everybody else. And so, he broadens out the argument.

Look at verse 27. 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.

See, he plays, doesn't he, on the deep-rooted affections of the people of Ephesus. Their great temple. Their pride and joy.

Their goddess. The one who they've made with their own hands. Their goddess. Their very identity. And Demetrius is saying, Paul is insulting our goddess.

[18 : 39] Yes. And to insult her. Well, it's really to insult us. Because we are Artemis. That's tied up with our identity.

And going after somebody's gods. Is really to go after them. Insult a football club. You insult the fan. Insult Artemis.

Well, you insult all the Ephesians. You see, when you express disagreement about someone's idols. As Paul would have done. As he preached the gospel.

People take it personally. It's blasphemy. How dare you? How dare you say that against Artemis? And so, pushback was inevitable then and today.

See, Demetrius saw very clearly the threat posed by Paul's gospel. He knows what will happen. As Paul's message continues to take hold.

[19 : 42] He's no fool. He knows that his very livelihood is at threat. Because the facade of the worship of Artemis is being exposed. People are seeing this is just something made with our hands.

How can that be a god? Paul is coming and declaring that no, the Lord is God. There is a creator. You must turn and repent. It's Jesus. Turn to him. And Demetrius can see the threat.

And so, he stirs up this riot. No attempt made to engage with the gospel. No attempt to counter Paul's arguments with rational arguments.

No attempt to actually engage in debate. But rather, it's a denial to allow any sort of debate at all. And look what happens. When they heard this, verse 28.

They were enraged. And were crying out. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. So, scene one.

[20 : 46] The gospel disturbs. Scene two. The confusion of the crowd. Verse 28 to 34. So, the beginning.

The trade guild of idol makers. Has started this loud shouting. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. And then, word spreads.

Verse 29. So, the city was filled with confusion. And they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus and Macedonians, who are Paul's companions. People across the city hear the uproar.

There's great confusion. They begin to gather in the theater. And that was the kind of central gathering place. It was a big theater. 25,000 people could gather in the theater.

And people start to come. And there's a great crowd there. There's confusion. Hysteria. Notice verse 32. Now some cried one thing, some another.

[21 : 50] For the assembly was in confusion. And most of them did not know why they'd come together. They didn't even know why they were there. They just came. They heard this great noise. And they start shouting, because everyone's shouting, great is the audience of the Ephesians.

But they don't really know what they're there for. They know something's going on. Confusion. And we see the same sort of confusion and chaos today as we look around us.

The battles of identity politics are finding narrower and narrower interest groups to champion. And trample over the rights of others. It is confusing as you look out and try and examine what's going on.

Because the interests are totally at odds with each other. For example, the transgender movement does not coalesce neatly with the interests of many others.

They are at odds with each other. They are at odds with each other. They are at odds with one another. As one writer recently wrote in his book, *The Madness of Crowds*, he said, The advocates of social justice, identity politics, and intersectionality do not all lock neatly together, but grind hideously and noisily, both against each other and within themselves.

[23 : 12] They produce friction rather than diminish it, and increase tensions and crowd madresses more than they produce peace of mind. See, people in our world, in our media, get swept up with shouts and hysteria.

But in reality, it's a confused mess of competing demands and ever louder shouts. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. It's that sort of thing. They don't even know why they're shouting, but they're shouting. And for two hours straight here in Ephesus, they shout.

And they don't even know what for. Confusion reigns, and at its root then, but also today, was a deep-seated, perhaps unspoken, opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Demetrius knew what he was doing. He knew the threat the gospel presented. And he throws up this confusion, this riot. People gather, but they don't know what they're there for. And similarly to today, there are people out there who know what they're doing.

[24 : 24] They have opposition to the gospel, but they sweep in so many other people. There's confusion. People don't know what's going on. Confusion reigns. There is opposition to the gospel because the gospel calls all of us, all people everywhere, from every background, from every identity group, the gospel calls all of us to stop following the dreams of our own hearts, to stop following the gods that we've created, and to follow our creator and laws.

That is the call of the gospel. And it may mean, for some, saying no to the gods of sexual freedom that characterized first century Ephesus as much as they characterize us today.

And that is a challenge. And for many, that challenge is considered dangerous. It must be shouted down. Now, Tim Farron, the former leader of the Lib Dems, said a few years ago, he says, if you actively hold a faith that is more than an expression of cultural identity, you are deemed to be far worse than eccentric.

You are offensive. You're dangerous. See, the gospel will provoke an angry response from some in our world, won't it?

See, men's minds are darkened. We are by nature lovers of darkness, not the light. In his gospel, John writes these words, the light has come into the world, and people love the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil.

[26 : 18] And that is exactly the response we have here in Acts 19 with Demetrius. They love the darkness rather than the light.

Demetrius says, I will not have it. I will not have Jesus. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Yes, I've made it with my own hands, but great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

I will not have Jesus. See, the Christian faith will ruffle feathers. It will challenge the status quo. It will call people to repentance.

And opposition, sometimes like this, shrill, public shaming of Paul and those who are surrounding him, that will be the result.

Sometimes you will have this sort of thing, this rioting, this loud, confused, shouting mess against the gospel and its implications. That will be what happens sometimes.

[27 : 26] But note, this is not something that Christians are to go looking for. That's clear from the last scene with the town clerk from verse 35.

And we see in this last little section the vindication of gospel messengers. So we've just had the gospel disturbing the status quo. Demetrius can see what's going on, so he whips up the crowds in opposition to the gospel.

There's confusion. But things do calm down, and God's gospel messengers are vindicated in the end.

Now, the clerk's main objective is to keep the peace and avoid the charge of rioting, verse 40. It would not have gone down well with their Roman masters.

He does acknowledge that the basis of the opposition to Paul and his team is groundless. Look at verse 37. He says, You have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

[28 : 32] If, therefore, Demetrius and the craftsman with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. So from the town clerk's perspective, Paul and his team are not responsible for this riot.

They've not gone looking for trouble, and so the right course to take. If Demetrius really thinks he's got a solid case, well, he can take it to the courts. And the whole situation, by verse 41, is diffused.

The crowd are dismissed. The riot's over. And this final scene adds to a running theme that you see through the book of Acts, where God's messengers are often vindicators.

There are many times when they get in trouble with the authorities, but time and time again, the charges are proved groundless. God's messengers are vindicators.

Now, whilst it's true that Paul undoubtedly spoke against the worship of false gods, he's done it through reasoning and persuading, not rabble-rising, not starting riots.

[29 : 47] That's not Paul's way. And he's vindicated of wrongdoing, as so many others have been vindicated through the book of Acts. Back in chapter 4, think about Peter and John before the rulers and elders in Jerusalem.

In chapter 5, the apostles are arrested by the high priests and the Sadducees. In chapter 12, Herod arrests Peter. And again in chapter 16, Paul and Silas, we saw that a few weeks ago, arrested in Philippi.

And then Paul will go on to face more opposition and charges. But in every case, in every case, they've vindicated. They've done nothing wrong.

And it's a reminder of God's gracious protection. When slanderous attempts are made to silence the gospel, there is in the end only one victor.

And it may not be vindication in this life. We may not always be vindicated in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of the Lord, we are.

[30 : 52] And we know in the end, the gospel prevails. So that's the eternal perspective. But in the here and now, in this incident in Acts 19, Luke is demonstrating that these Christians there in Ephesus have been found not guilty of any wrongdoing.

Yes, the gospel itself will disrupt. It must. Because the gospel calls people to repent. But alongside that reality, we also see that the servants of the gospel don't cause unnecessary disruption.

The gospel in itself will create enough. And they're not adding to it here. Paul's not going out of his way to create this sort of disturbance. So the gospel disrupts, but we're not to.

We're not to create disruption where we don't need to. We are to be careful as far as possible to not do that. And Luke is demonstrating both these things all the time through the book of Acts.

Yes, the gospel stirs up opposition, but over and over, Christians, those who are saying that message, are shown to be vindicated from wrongdoing. And it's something of a tightrope, isn't it?

[32 : 13] Because the gospel does offend. We can't avoid that. But we are not to go out of our way to be offensive unnecessarily. Both those things have got to be held in tension.

I remember reading an article from Andrew Hurd, who was here a few years ago, Australian chap. And here's what he says. The gospel is a challenge.

It won't make leaders and churches popular. The church is to be a pillar of truth. It is to be a place where discernment is exercised, disciplines enacted, and challenges issued that will cut people to the heart.

It is necessary to drink deeply of the image of Jesus as the suffering servant, and of Paul, the minister of the gospel who died daily and was despised like his master.

We need to pray that we are able to resist throughout our lives and ministry the seductive call of the world to get its respect, to be its friend.

[33 : 21] The world, the city, Ephesus, Glasgow, will constantly be saying, actively and passively, that if you want to be accepted, you cannot say that, and you need to say and do this.

See, the world around will always say you cannot say the gospel and its implications. Tone it down. Make it more acceptable, please. Do not challenge our idols.

And so we must fear God rather than man. Do not fear what man thinks, but what God thinks.

We must be prepared to faithfully tell the gospel and call people to repentance and faith. We must be prepared to apply the word of God to our society, to what's going on in the world.

There is offense in the gospel. We cannot water it down or dodge it. But, at the same time, we are not to be rabble-rousers.

[34 : 37] We do not go out of our way to be offensive. No, we persuade, we engage. We don't start riots. It wasn't the Apostle Paul who started to write here, was it?

It was Demetrius. It was Demetrius who refused to engage in debate. It was Demetrius who wanted to de-platform. It was Demetrius who whips up emotion and dogma. It was Demetrius who breeds confusion, not clarity.

It was Demetrius who breeds anger and disrupts the peace. Sound familiar? Well, in the end, the anti-gospel world has no answer.

And it will result to these sort of tactics and basic emotive slogans like, great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

Love is love. Be true to yourself. Be who you are. Simple, catchy slogans designed to put the gospel at arm's length.

[35 : 46] Christianity, on the other hand, seeks to persuade with words, engage your brain, to peacefully draw people away from all that's eternally harmful and shameful.

The contrast could not be sharpened, could it, between Demetrius and Paul. So can I close by addressing two potential groups of people here tonight?

One, maybe you wouldn't call yourself a Christian yet, you're not yet a follower of Jesus. Can I warn you, can I ask you, do not be like Demetrius.

Do not be like Demetrius when challenged with the call of the gospel. For him, the rubber hit the road with his business. It may be something else for you.

But the gospel provoked him to anger, and it was an anger that hardened into opposition. Don't be like that.

[36 : 52] Don't be like Demetrius. Rather, let your anger, and anger is actually a natural response to the gospel because the gospel presents a real challenge, doesn't it, to who we are and what we're doing.

It's a direct challenge to who's really in charge of our lives. So let that anger give way to repentance and trust in Jesus.

That's my plea to you this evening. If you don't yet follow the Lord, do not be like Demetrius. Do not harden into opposition, but rather yield your life to Jesus because he is the Lord.

God and for those who are believers, if you're a follower of Jesus this evening, don't be a rabble rouser, but don't seek to mitigate all offense either.

The gospel unavoidably, inevitably, does offend sinful human beings. And there's such a temptation to not do that, to not say the difficult thing, just to pedal back, but we can't.

[38 : 06] Our task is to proclaim the gospel in its fullness. We don't aim to offend, but we can't avoid it sometimes. Like Paul, we seek to peaceably persuade and win folk to Christ.

That doesn't mean that in every case, we will win people to Christ, but there are many in this city, the harvest is plentiful, there are many who will. Hearing that call, they will respond, they will repent, they will believe.

Some will respond and enjoy eternal salvation. And that was Paul's legacy in Ephesus. Many were won for Christ, but also many were angered opposition.

That's always the impact of the gospel. In every place, in Ephesus, in Glasgow, that's always going to be the response. So if we do encounter hysterical, loud, angry opposition to our gospel witness, don't panic, stay calm, don't be surprised, but don't stop witnessing to Jesus.

It does offend, but we're not to go out of our way to be offensive. That's the message of Acts 19. Let me pray, and then we'll finish our time together with our final hymn.

[39 : 38] Father, we do thank you that the power of the gospel does not rest with us. It is not down to our clever words, or our creative strategies, or anything that we can think of, but the power for salvation is in your gospel message and through your spirit at work in the lives of all around us.

So Lord, please would you help us to trust you, help us to keep going, to keep holding out the word of life, even if it does produce kickback, even kickback to the extent of what we've seen tonight in Acts 19.

Lord, keep us being surprised, but keep us faithful. Keep us about our task together of holding out the gospel, because to some it is the smell of life and beauty.

For others the stench of death. Lord, help us to hold the line, help us to keep going for another week, we ask in Jesus' name.

Amen.