

# A Dangerous Gospel?

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] We're going to be reading now and turning in our Bibles. Perhaps you'd turn with me to the book of Acts after the four Gospels. Acts tells the story of the ongoing mission of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, sending his Spirit upon his church and that great mission to the world led by the apostles. Paul Brennan's been leading us through some of these chapters of late and we come this morning to midway through chapter 19 and we're going to read from verse 21 to the end.

After the extraordinary events that we read about last week with the seven sons of Sceva, after these events, Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and to go to Jerusalem, saying, after I've been there, I must also see Rome. And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. By 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 for workmen in similar trades. And he 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 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 confusion.

And they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples wouldn't let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him, urging him not to venture into the theater. And some cried out one thing, some another. The assembly was in confusion. And most of them didn't know why they'd come together. 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. 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. When the town clerk had quietened the crowd, he said, men of Ephesus, who is there who doesn't know that the city of the Ephesians is 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 brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, well, 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's no cause that we can give to justify this commotion. And when he said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

Amen. And may God bless to us this his word. Good, all please do turn to that passage from Acts chapter 19 and we'll think about this passage this morning.

[ 4 : 16 ] Acts 19 and from verse 21. Now here's the question posed by our passage this morning. Is the gospel, is the message of the gospel, the Christian faith, is it something beautiful and good or is it something dark and dangerous?

The gospel message is news about Jesus Christ, about who he is, about what he has done. But it's also a call to take heed of the implications of those realities about Jesus. It is not news to be quickly read and then passed over and moved on to the next thing. No, the implications of the gospel could not be bigger. The gospel is news about Jesus and the call to repentance that must be made by each one of us.

Repent and believe in Jesus. The gospel is good news because it's news about a savior who will actually save people through the forgiveness of sins. It is news that changes and disrupts. It is news that alters destinies, not merely for the remainder of our earthly lives, but for all eternity.

And that is therefore a message that will undoubtedly ruffle feathers. It must do, wasn't it? If it's of that scale, then it must. For some, the call of the gospel is beautiful. It is the call from the heavenly father, the creator of the universe, the creator of the universe, the one who gives them every breath.

He's calling them to turn away, to repent of their rejection of him and turn to him and enjoy him forever. For some, it's beautiful. But for others, the gospel is the stench of death. And some see it as a danger.

[ 6 : 24 ] That's at the very heart of the objection in this chapter. Notice Demetrius 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 our great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing. The danger of the gospel.

You see, the gospel challenges us. The gospel is not a few blessed thoughts to get your day off to a nice start, a bit of pleasant background noise in the background of your life. No. If you're not yet a follower of Jesus, then the gospel is the most basic challenge there is to your whole way of life.

It is not a call to make a few tweaks here and there to your life. No, it's a call to turn around completely, totally, and turn and follow Jesus. And Demetrius, the key figure in our chapter this morning, Demetrius knew that to be the case. He knew that the gospel hurls a challenge at a man's way of life, disputes it, and outrightly summons him to a radical change, as someone once said. It's a total challenge, a total call to turn away. And kickback is therefore inevitable. Kickback is what we see here in this chapter in the most vivid way. Now, we have rumblings of pushback in Ephesus already, haven't we? We've seen that in chapters 18 and 19. There's opposition from the synagogue, so much so that Paul has to move out and go to the hall of Tyrannus, where he continues his daily ministry.

Then there's the incident of the seven sons of Sceva. There's the burning of millions of pounds worth of books detailing the magic arts. A lot's been going on in Ephesus, but it's not yet finished, is it? We've got the end of chapter 19 to come. You see, Paul's preaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is doing things. Lives are being transformed. Some to eternal glory and joy, but others, well, they're being hardened into resistance. And we've seen that bubbling away in Ephesus.

[ 8 : 57 ] And it comes out pouring now in this chapter. It's what we see in our passage this morning. We see that the gospel ruffles feathers unavoidably. We'll take it in three scenes, this second half of 19.

So scene one from verse 21, the dangerous gospel disturbs. The dangerous gospel disturbs. Now, this section begins innocuously enough.

What we have there in verses 21 and 22 is actually a summary statement of all that's to follow in the rest of Acts. It sets the scene. It's like the contents page for what's to come.

Paul resolves in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and to go to Jerusalem, saying that after I've been there, I must also see Rome.

That is Paul's plan for the next stage in this ministry. And that's what we see as we read on through the rest of Acts, Paul making these journeys. And having sent off Timothy and Erastus ahead of him, Paul stays in Ephesus for a little longer.

[ 10 : 04 ] We see that at the end of verse 22. And it's around this time that things really begin to kick off in Ephesus. It begins with this chap called Demetrius.

Now, Demetrius is a silversmith. Demetrius makes silver shrines of Artemis. Now, Artemis was a goddess.

And this was a huge deal for the city of Ephesus. She was, so the legend goes, the mythical daughter of Zeus and Leto.

She was associated with health and help of various kinds and was worshipped because of her lordship over supernatural power. She was also the fertility god. More of that later.

But there was, there in Ephesus, a massive temple dedicated to this goddess, dedicated to Artemis.

[ 11 : 04 ] It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was more than double the size of the White House. This was a massive building. Antipater, the Greek poet, who was credited with the list of the seven wonders, said this about Ephesus.

He says, I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon, on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the sun, and the huge labor of the high pyramids, and the vast tombs of Molossus.

But, when I saw the house of Artemis, that mountain to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy. This was some temple.

It dominated the skyline of Ephesus. It dominated the hearts of the Ephesians. It dominated, it seems, the economy. And that is clear, as Demetrius calls a meeting of the silversmiths of Ephesus Guild.

The whole cult of Artemis is a major source of business and income for these idol makers. And he's upfront about that, isn't he? Look at verse 25. He says, man, you know that from this business, we have our wealth.

[ 12 : 27 ] That is the business of making shrines, idols of the temple and of Artemis. However, there is a major threat to their bottom line.

Look at verse 26. 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.

Do you see what's happening? The gospel has begun to take 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 and turned around. People are repenting and believing in Jesus. And that fact does, as it ought to be, impact how people behave.

And in particular, seen in their rejection, their turning away from false gods. And anything that threatens the cult of Artemis would threaten the pockets of Demetrius and his colleagues.

[ 13 : 41 ] See, the gospel, well, it presented a threat to the economy and to their wealth. James Philip, when he writes on this passage, says that when the gospel presumes to challenge a vested interest of whatever kind, either in business or personal life, trouble always lies ahead.

See, the gospel always challenges, and it will challenge vested interests. Just think of the example of William Wilberforce. He could not countenance the horrors of the African slave trade.

The gospel shaped his worldview. When he heard what was happening, he could not do nothing. But what opposition he received. Huge vested interests were arrayed against Wilberforce and his colleagues.

And it took decades, years and years and years, to see the implications of the gospel make it onto the pages of British legislation. You see, the gospel will sometimes challenge in such a way as to threaten profit margins.

That was the issue for Wilberforce. Huge amounts of money tied up with all of that. The gospel will sometimes challenge profit margins.

[ 15 : 06 ] And that was certainly the concern of Demetrius and his pals. But not so much a concern for the rest of the populace. He begins his argument with the particular interests of his own business and others like him.

But he knows that won't really gain traction with the rider population. Why would they care about his bottom line? And so he takes a line that he knows will get a broader hearing.

Look at verse 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 of her magnificence, she in whom all Asia and the world worship.

He plays on the affections of the Ephesian populace. Their great temple. Their pride and joy. One of the great wonders of the world. Their identity.

It was their temple. And it was, in fact, a place of sexual immorality. The annual festival of Artemis. It was known for its sexual indulgence, its orgies.

[ 16 : 27 ] And Demetrius, he knows all this. And he saw very clearly the threat posed by Paul's gospel. He knows what will happen if Paul's message continues to take hold.

He's no fool. And so he stirs up a riot. No attempt made to engage with the gospel. No attempt to counter Paul's reasoning and arguing.

This is classic no platforming. No attempt to actually engage in the debate, but rather a denial to allow any sort of debate at all. The men with Demetrius begin to shout, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.

Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Scene two. The confusion of the crowd. Notice the result of their shouting.

In verse 28 and 29, the city was filled with confusion. People across the city heard the uproar. This great confusion. They began to gather in the theater.

[ 17 : 35 ] And this was a big place. Ephesus was a place of magnificent buildings. And the theater could hold up to 30,000 people apparently. Imagine Ibrox or Celtic Park on a busy Saturday.

It's a big place. Great crowds. Great crowds. But confusion. It's the sort of scene that's really become quite familiar to us in past years, isn't it?

Whether it's Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter or the scenes at Capitol Hill in Washington recently. Hysteria. Great crowds. Violence. Notice here in verse 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.

They don't even know why they're there. They just hear the noise. They come. They start shouting. And we see that same confusion. That same chaos today. The battles of identity politics are finding narrower and narrower interest groups to champion and trample over the rights of others.

[ 18 : 47 ] The interests, for example, the interests of the transgender movement do not coalesce neatly with the interests of many others in the LGBTQI rainbow alliance.

As Douglas Murray writes in his recent book, *The Madness of Crowds*. He says this. 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.

They produce friction rather than diminish it and increase tensions and crowd madresses more than they produce peace of mind. See, people, our media, get swept up in the 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. For two hours straight, they shout. And they don't even know what for, really.

It is the great crowd derangement. And again, Douglas Murray, writing in 2020. He might even have been writing of the first century in Ephesus. He said, in public and in private, both online and off, people are behaving in ways that are increasingly irrational, feverish, herd-like, and simply unpleasant.

[ 20 : 19 ] Confusion reigns. And at its root, at its root, then and today, was a deep-seated, unspoken, perhaps hidden to many, fundamental opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because the gospel calls all of us, all people everywhere, from every background, from every identity group, to stop following the dreams of our own hearts, to stop following the gods made of our own imaginings and crafted by our own hands.

Stop all that and follow the Lord Jesus Christ, our creator and Lord. That's what's undergirding Demetrius' opposition here. It may mean letting go of some income streams that have perhaps brought us great wealth.

It may mean saying no to the gods of sexual freedom that characterized first century Ephesus as much as they characterized 21st century Glasgow. But that is a challenge that, for some, is considered dangerous and must be shouted down.

It was the case for Demetrius, but it's also true today. Phil Copeland was showing me a quote from Tim Farron when he was preaching on this a couple of years ago.

[ 21 : 40 ] And here's what Tim Farron said, the former leader of the Lib Dems. He's an MP. Here's what he said. If you actively hold a faith that is more than an expression of cultural identity, you are deemed to be far worse than merely eccentric.

You are offensive. You are dangerous. You see, the gospel will provoke an angry response in some people, won't it?

You see, men's minds are darkened. And we are, by nature, lovers of the darkness. We shun the light. What does John write in his gospel?

He says, the light has come into the world. And people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

And that is exactly the response you have here from Demetrius and all who are with him. I will not have it. I will not have it.

[ 22 : 48 ] Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. You see, the Christian faith will ruffle feathers. It will challenge the status quo. It will call people to repentance.

And opposition, sometimes shrill, public shaming, like what we see here in Ephesus, will be the result. 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. The clerk quells the riot. This is from verse 35.

Now, whilst the clerk's main objective is to keep the peace and to avoid the charge of rioting, verse 40, which 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.

At least that's the card he plays, even if he doesn't really believe it. It's interesting, isn't it? He talks about how they are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. But I think Paul's been pretty straight down the line on the fact that Artemis is a false god.

[ 24 : 06 ] So I'm not sure his argument is entirely genuine. But regardless, notice verse 37. You brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess.

If, therefore, Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open and they are proconsuls. Let them bring their charges there 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 has a solid case, is to take it to the courts.

The whole situation is diffused. Verse 41. He dismisses the crowd. Now this final scene adds to something of a running theme through Acts, which is the repeated vindication of Christians against the charges of being criminals.

Now whilst it is absolutely true that Paul has undoubtedly spoken against the worship of false gods, he's done it through reasoning and persuasion.

[ 25 : 22 ] Not through rabble-rousing and starting riots. He's vindicated of wrongdoing and many others have been vindicated through the book of Acts. Chapter 4.

Peter and John, the rulers and elders in Jerusalem. Chapter 5. When the apostles are arrested by the high priests and the Sadducees. Chapter 12.

With Herod's arrest of Peter. Chapter 16. Paul and Silas and Philippi. Chapter 18. We'll see Paul before Galileo and Corinth. Chapter 26.

Paul before Agrippa. Over and over again. God's servants are vindicators. And it's a reminder of God's gracious protection.

That when slanderous attempts are made to silence the gospel, there is in the end only one victor. The gospel prevails. The witness is unhindered. It goes forward.

[ 26 : 19 ] Nothing will stop it. But Luke is also demonstrating that these Christians have not been found guilty of any official wrongdoing.

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

They are careful. As far as possible. To keep the laws of the land and not stir things up. Luke demonstrates both of these things.

Yes, the gospel stirs up opposition. But over and over, Christians are shown to be vindicated from wrongdoing. It is something of a tightrope, isn't it?

Because the gospel does offend. It does bring opposition. I was reading an article by Andrew Hurd, who was with us about a year ago.

[ 27 : 25 ] Do you remember before lockdown, before all of this happened? Andrew Hurd from Australia. And I was reading this article. And he says this. The gospel is a challenge. It won't make leaders and churches popular.

The church is to be the 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, he writes, 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.

And the world, the city, will constantly be saying, actively and passively, that if you want to be accepted, you cannot say that.

[ 28 : 29 ] And you need to say or do this. And so in this sense, as Andrew Hurd's writing, we must fear God more than man.

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 society, as Paul did.

He called out the false worship of Artemis. There is offense in the gospel. We cannot water that down or dodge it. But at the same time, we are not to be rabble-rousers.

We don't 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 the riot here, was it?

No, it was Demetrius. It was Demetrius who refuses to engage in debate. It was Demetrius who wanted to de-platform. It's Demetrius who whips up emotion and dogma. It is Demetrius who breeds confusion, not clarity.

[ 29 : 40 ] It's Demetrius who breeds anger, disrupts the peace. Sound familiar? In the end, the anti-gospel world has no answer.

And it will resort to these kinds of tactics and basic emotive slogans like, Great is Artemis of the Ephesians. Love is love.

Christianity, on the other hand, seeks to persuade with words, to peacefully draw people away from all that is eternally harmful and shameful. The contrast could not be sharper, could it?

So can I close our time by addressing two potential groups of people? One is those who have not yet called themselves followers of Jesus. Can I warn you?

Don't be like Demetrius. Don't be like Demetrius when challenged with the gospel. For him, the rubber hit the road with his business.

[ 30 : 50 ] It may be something else for you. But the gospel provoked anger in him. An anger which hardened into opposition. And eventually a riot.

Don't be like that. Rather, let your anger. Anger which is actually a natural response to the gospel because it presents a direct challenge to who is really in charge of your life.

Of course it produces anger. But let that anger give way to repentance. And trust in Jesus. That's my plea to you this morning.

But perhaps you are a believer listening in, watching online this morning. Again, don't be like Demetrius.

Don't follow his tactics when you encounter opposition to the gospel. Don't be a rabble rouser. Rather like Paul, seek to peaceably persuade and win folk to Christ.

[ 31 : 53 ] That doesn't mean that in every case you'll win friends. But you will win some to eternal salvation. That was Paul's legacy in Ephesus.

Many, many are one for Christ. Many are rescued out of idolatry and sin and eternal damnation. Many are one for Christ. But also many are angry to opposition.

That is always the impact of the gospel in every place. In Ephesus and in Glasgow. So don't be discouraged when the crowd seeks to protect itself from the implications of the gospel.

In the end, that is a futile protest. Don't forget that you belong to the Lord of creation. And he will never leave or forsake you.

Don't be silenced when the crowd shouts ever louder. In support of the gods of this age. And don't resort to their tactics.

[ 33 : 02 ] Rather, we speak persuasively, patiently. Witnessing to our Lord Jesus Christ. Calling people to turn to him and know eternal life. So don't panic when the crowd shouts ever louder.

Be patient and persevere. That is our great privilege. To share the gospel. Is it dangerous?

Is the gospel dangerous? Many think so. But the real danger. The real danger from eternity's perspective. Is to reject it.

That is dangerous. So don't reject the gospel. Accept it. Repent. And know eternal life. Let me pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for this chapter. We thank you for the real clarity and confidence it gives us. In not only the content of the gospel. But also its implications.

[ 34 : 05 ] What it results in. The things it provokes. And Lord, please. Would you give us great courage. Give us endurance. Give us. Give us voices.

Not to be silenced. But to stand firm as witnesses. For we ask it. In Jesus name. Amen.