Dethroning the "gods"

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Preacher: Shawn Woo

[0:00] to you this morning. We're in chapter 19 of the book of Acts, so please open your Bibles with me to Acts chapter 19, verses 21 to 41. Acts chapter 19, verses 21 to 41.

If there's any of you who's unfamiliar with the Bible, Acts is in the New Testament after the Gospel of John before the book of Romans. Let me pray for the reading and preaching of God's Word. Father, I tremble before your Word. Lord, what a staggering privilege it is to be a mouthpiece for your Word, and I pray that you help me to say only what you would have me say.
And I pray that your Word is read and preached, that it would have its intended effect on us as your people, that Christ would be exalted, that our minds would be renewed, that we would leave this place with a fresh sense of wonder and worship before you, our mighty God.
Address us now. We are listening, Lord. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
[1:59] Acts chapter 19, verses 21 to 41. 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.

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.
[3:22] 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 theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus.

Macedonians were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in 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 theater.
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 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!
And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?
[4:36] 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.

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, you 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.

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And when he has said these things, he dismissed the assembly. This is God's holy and authoritative word. This passage teaches us mainly that the way of Christ, which is the way that's mentioned here in verse 23, that no little disturbance concerning the way, the way of Christ disrupts society by deposing the gods of this world.
And we're going to look at two contrasts that Luke intentionally draws here in this passage. First is the contrast between the spirit-driven Paul and the prophet-driven Demetrius.
[5:51] And secondly, the disorderly assembly versus the peaceable church. And so we're going to look at this in turn. Let's look at first the spirit-driven Paul versus the prophet-driven Demetrius.

It says in verses 21 to 22, Now after these events, Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem saying, After I've been there, I must also see Rome. So this verse serves as an outline for the rest of the book of Acts. Paul does indeed pass through Macedonia and Achaia in chapter 20. That included cities like Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth.
And then he goes to Jerusalem in chapter 21. And finally, he ends up in Rome in chapter 28. And for those of you who are familiar with the book, know that Paul's missionary journeys were not walks in the park.
He was not a man who had caught a travel bug and visited various cities to see landmarks and enjoy the local cuisine. Paul recounts in 2 Corinthians 11, 23 to 27, that during his missionary travels, he was imprisoned, beaten countless times, and often to the point of death, stoned, thrice shipwrecked, having spent the night and the day adrift at sea.
[7:13] He had to cross treacherous rivers, brave roads frequented by robbers. He endured many a sleepless night, he says, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

That raises the question, why would a sensible human being do something like that? Why would a sensible person endure such pains and labors?
Verse 21 tells us Paul resolved in the Spirit to do these things. Paul had decided, he had resolved in his heart and mind to revisit these regions, to care for the churches that had been established there. It's similar to a resolution that Jonathan Edwards, an 18th century American pastor made on January 12, 1723. He said, Paul had resolved, never henceforward till I die, to act as if I were any way my own, but entirely and altogether God's.
Paul had resolved, as he tells us in Romans 15, 18 to 20, to fulfill the ministry of the gospel of Christ. To preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been named.
[8:33] And because there were places in the world where Christ was not worshipped, until every tongue confessed the name of Jesus, and until every knee bowed before Jesus, Paul made it his lifelong ambition to preach the gospel.

But this is not a testament to mere human willpower. This is Paul resolved in the Spirit. In other words, Paul's resolution was directed by and driven by the Spirit of God.
Paul was a man whose life was controlled by the Spirit. And Luke has been very explicit up to this point in the book about how the Holy Spirit is the one who directs the mission of the church.
In Acts 16, the Holy Spirit forbade Paul from going into Asia for a time and then redirected him to Europe, and then finally opened the door for him to preach the gospel in Asia, which is where he is now.
Paul is not the person that's sitting on the executive chair in the command center, in the headquarters, charting the course. It's the Spirit of God who is directing the mission of the church.
[9:41] And that's the pattern that holds here in this passage also. And because the direction comes not from man but from God, no one with a worldly perspective, no one whose purposes and priorities are informed by the sinful world can plot the trajectory of Paul's life and ministry.

Because Paul is a man who is born of the Spirit. John 3, 8 says, It's what Paul's like.
That's why he's going to these places. You can't predict it unless you put the Spirit of God into the equation. This reminds me of some of you who joined the church plant initially about five or six years ago, even though you're from Pennsylvania or New Jersey, and all your family is there.
Or some of you who came to serve this church more recently, moved up here to be part of the church from Maryland. I also think of those of you who are preparing now to leave for midterm or long-term foreign missions.
It makes no worldly sense. Why would people leave jobs, houses, families, and all that is comfortable and familiar?

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[11:11] They wouldn't do it if they were complacent or noncommittal. It only makes sense because they are resolved, surrendered, submitted to the move of the Holy Spirit.

They are men and women born of the Spirit. And Paul wasn't the only one. There were also two other helpers, Timothy and Erastus, whom Paul sent into Macedonia ahead of him to minister there. And then we find two other companions later as well, Gaius and Aristarchus. And so contrast these Spirit-driven brothers with the prophet-driven Demetrius in the following verses.
It says in verses 23-24, 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.
Note the contrast between, note the parallel rather, between those two phrases. No little disturbance, no little business. Both are examples of the literary device, Lytites, Which is an ironic understatement that states a negative in order to affirm the opposite, to affirm a positive.
[12:24] So the sale of miniature replicas of Artemis' shrine brought no little business to the craftsmen, Which means it brought, brings trucks worth of money to them.

Remember the preceding passage in verse 9, With the new converts in Ephesus, When the new converts to Christianity renounced their pagan magical practices, And burned all their magical books, The sum of it came to the U.S. equivalent of 6 million dollars.
This is a very lucrative business. You bet something like that would have had a disruptive effect on the economy, And affect people's pocketbooks. So when the infiltration of the gospel in Ephesus started to transform people, It subverted the religious and the related political and economic structures of the city.
And people with the financial stake in preserving the status quo, Guarding the idolatries of the city, Were up in arms. So the phrase no little business parallels no little disturbance, Because the business connected to the idolatry was massive, The disturbance consequently caused by the gospel was similarly massive.
The more deeply rooted a weed is, The more it disrupts the soil around it when you pull it out.
Demetrius the silversmith gathered around the other craftsmen of similar trades, And said in verses 25 to 27, Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.
[13:59] And you see in here 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's danger, Not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, But also that the temple of 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.
So Demetrius stirs up two specific fears in order to rile up his fellow craftsmen, And the first is that their trade might become disreputable, And the second is that their goddess Artemis might be deposed.
He warns that the temple of the great Artemis may be counted as nothing. That's a significant concern for the Ephesians. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus in modern day Turkey is almost completely destroyed now.
There's almost nothing left. But it was considered one of the seven wonders of the world by ancient people. Pliny, a first century AD Roman philosopher and naturalist, Describes the temple as 115 meters long and 55 meters wide, Or 377 feet long and 180 feet wide.
[15:13] For those of you, some of you, but that probably means nothing to you, Because that's the way it is for me. I hear those numbers and I have no idea how big that is. That's basically the size of a football field, American football field.

A little bit bigger in width and length. That's a huge temple. You could play football in it. It was made almost entirely of marble. And it was supported by 127 columns, each of which was about 60 feet high.
Second century BC Greek poet named Antipater of Sidon singled out the temple of Artemis As the most impressive of the seven wonders.
He says, For these reasons, the temple of Artemis was a source of grace.
Great civic pride for the Ephesians. And people did, indeed, come from all over the world to worship Artemis in Ephesus. Who is Artemis?
[16:32] The Greek gods worshipped Artemis as a goddess of the wild. The Roman equivalent being Diana. Wonder woman, right?

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She was often depicted as a huntress with a bow and an arrow. Often pictured with a stag, a male deer by her side, representing her unbounded freedom.
She was a maiden, sworn never to marry. She was worshipped as the goddess of virginity. So this, too, represented her wildness and her freedom.
She was sexually free, unentangled by relationships, not subject to anyone else's authority. A master of herself. That's the ideal that Artemis embodied.
The cult of Artemis, in this sense, is not all that different from the idolatry of the modern self in our day and age. People in our day don't see themselves as people created in the image of God, who should strive to be more and more conformed to him and his image.
[17:42] They see themselves as masters of their own lives. Free to define their existence and their own identity however they wish or feel.

Some people call this, quote, expressive individualism. That's what some sociologists call it. It's captured by slogans like, Find yourself. Be true to yourself.
Follow your heart. Do what makes you feel good. You do you. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor defines this expressive individualism as the belief that each one of us has his, her own way of realizing our humanity and that it is important to find and live out one's own as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside by society or the previous generation or religious or political authority.
If you think about it, you will see that this characterizes much of and explains much of our culture. Instead of the Christian value of humble submission to authority and conformity to the truths and laws of God, there is in our culture a suspicion and a rejection of authority.
An Artemis-like deification of individual autonomy and self-expression. Instead of letting God define us, our culture teaches every individual to embark on a journey of self-discovery and maximal self-expression.
[19:13] The final authority is my own feelings. But this is nothing less than an idolatry of the self.

We need to dethrone the self so that God might be enthroned in our lives. God has already revealed His will for us in His Word.
We're not whoever we want to be, but what God has designed us to be. Artemis was merely a projection of humanity's desire for independence and their rebellion against the true God.
She was no God at all. This is why she can't fend for herself and her followers are worried about her being deposed from her magnificence.
Magnificence because she is powerless to do anything about it. But this is not even their ultimate concern. Their ultimate concern was not that the cult of Artemis might be neglected.
[20:20] They were concerned about that prospect mainly because that would mean the loss of revenue. They also worshiped the god of money, mammon.

We can infer this from the fact that Demetrius did not gather a group of ardent Ephesian worshippers of Artemis. No, he starts with the craftsmen who also benefited like he did from this business of making miniature replicas of Artemis' temple.
He began the speech by saying, Man, you know that from this business we have our wealth. Preserving their wealth was their ultimate concern.
And as we saw in Acts 17, Paul did preach that gods made with hands are not gods. His logic was that since we have been created by God, that the objects of our creation, the idols, cannot be God. The idols' statues of gold and silver and stone are products of the human imagination and human craftsmanship, and therefore they cannot possibly be God.
[21:26] And so Paul exhorted the people in Athens there in chapter 17 to worship the god who made the world rather than the gods that they have made. The economic implications of this are obvious.

Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen became wealthy by making these replicas and selling them. And their sales numbers are directly dependent on the number of people who worship Artemis and the number of people who believe that their miniature replicas are actual, that have actual cultic power.
I mean, their self-interest is pretty obvious, right? It's kind of like the, imagine like the creators of the Impossible Burger. Have you guys had that? I've never had it, but it's apparently a plant-based substitute to beef?

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Is that right? And imagine the people, the creators of the Impossible Burger, assembling everyone in the plant-based alternative foods industry and then protesting the inhumane treatment of livestock or claiming that eating meat is harmful to health.
Maybe, but I mean, they definitely can't claim to not be biased. So these manufacturers of Artemis shrines were biased, but they were also exploitative of the ignorance of the population.
[22:56] Imagine some con man buying a giant jug of the cheapest oil, vegetable oil, canola oil from the grocery store, pouring it into a whole bunch of little vials and then selling it at exorbitant prices as holy oil.

It'll heal all your diseases. He knows better than that. He knows that it's not going to heal anyone. Why? Because he made it. He knows where the oil came from.
He knows how much he paid for it, all five dollars. Similarly, these craftsmen knew exactly how those miniature replicas of the Temple of Artemis came to be.
They knew where the silver came from, and they're the ones who cut it and hammered it into shape, and yet they then turn around to sell them to people as religious objects with mysterious cultic power.
This is the futility of worshiping idols fashioned with our own hands. Luke includes this account in Acts not only to expose the futility of idolatry, but also to show us that the application of the gospel and obedience to the scriptures profoundly affects changes of culture and that it has economic as well as social political implications.
[24:20] Can you imagine what if so many people became Christians and were transformed by the gospel that casinos and porn sites went out of business?

What if the sale of cheap beer, gin, and whiskey, which are designed not to delight those with refined taste, but rather designed to promote drunkenness and market it to heavy drinkers, what if those sales plummeted because too many people were Christians?
What if Christians stopped using social media or started using them more responsibly in a disciplined and edifying way rather than in a vain, self-promoting, and gluttonous way, refusing to go into rabbit trails, stray into inappropriate or unhelpful or misinformed content so that the software engineers were forced to alter their algorithms or to swap out their product altogether?
What if so many people became Christians and put their hope not on the uncertainty of riches, but on the Lord, who certainly provides, and started stewarding their finances responsibly so that lottery tickets became unprofitable?
And convenience stores stopped selling them. Because lottery tickets also prey on the poor. What if so many people became Christians who are loving and respectful toward their respective spouses in a lifelong covenant of faithful marriage that divorce coaches and lawyers, divorce lawyers, had to find another line of work?
[26:24] When the gospel of Jesus takes hold of people's hearts, it has a profound effect.

And this also means that Christians are likely to face opposition from those whose trades depend on the idols of our culture. That brings me to my second and last point.
The contrast that Luke draws between the disorderly assembly and the peaceful church. Let me read verses 28 to 34. Please follow along with me. 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 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 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 theater. Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion.
[27:38] 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 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. So Demetrius and the other silversmiths managed to rouse an angry mob who are chanting, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.
They storm into the theater in Ephesus, which at the time could seat up to 24,000 people. And they drag Paul's two ministry companions there in Ephesus into the theater, Gaius and Aristarchus.

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Twice, Luke tells us that the crowd was characterized by confusion. Most of them didn't know why they were there. Classic mob psychology. Just follow the crowd.
Let's see if something exciting is happening. They don't know what's going on. And they're not willing to listen. When a Jew named Alexander sought to make a defense to the crowd, they shouted him down, drowned him out by continuing to chant, great is Artemis of the Ephesians.
[28:48] They did that for two straight hours. No wonder that other Christians didn't let Paul go into the theater. They feared for his life, his violent mob.

Even the Asiarchs, who are the magistrates who are charged with the city theater, didn't think that Paul should go in. Only after a couple hours of that chanting and shouting, the town's clerk is finally able to quiet the crowd.
And then as he's dismissing the crowd, he says this in verses 35 to 40. Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not 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 have 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 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.
[30:05] Paul and his fellow Christian laborers are vindicated by the town's clerk's summary, his judgment of the situation. Though they have indeed said, Paul and the other ministers, they did say that the idols made by human hands are not God's at all, but they haven't been unnecessarily confrontational or controversial.

Even though Paul was greatly provoked by the idolatry, he didn't go around smashing idols, vandalizing the temple of Artemis, toppling statues of Artemis.
They've simply and faithfully proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. It's not Christians who are guilty of throwing the city into commotion.
It's Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen, the worshipers of Artemis, who are responsible for the commotion. Look at verse 26. Demetrius admits that Paul, all Paul was doing was persuading people to turn away from idols.
Luke repeatedly tells us in the book of Acts that it was Paul's practice whenever he entered the new city that he would reason with the people that are there. He reasoned with them about Jesus, the lordship of Christ, his life, death, and resurrection.
[31:33] The Christians, throughout the book of Acts, have been eminently reasonable. It's the angry mobs that oppose them that cause commotion.

And that contrast is highlighted by the repeated use of the word assembly. Twice, Luke uses that word to describe the mob in verse 32 and verse 41, but this is, that use of that word is actually quite ironic because it's the word that's used to describe the regular, orderly, legal assembly of Roman people.
The regular assembly mentioned in verse 39. This was no such orderly assembly. This was an angry mob. And it's also ironic because the word assembly is the word that, the same Greek word that is most often used in the book of Acts dozens of times up to this point to refer to the church. church. The church is the assembly of God's saints. It's a congregation of believers. And so there's an implicit contrast here between the disorderly assembly of the Artemis worshipers and the peaceable assembly of Christ worshipers.
the early Christians were repeatedly falsely accused of creating civil disorder and violating Roman laws. That was not the case. It's the persecutors of the church, rather.
[33:06] They were the ones creating civil disorder. The gospel was disruptive, but it was the gospel itself that did all the disrupting and the Christians themselves were actually quite undisrupted.

Demetrius and the other silversmiths had legal recourse if Paul had committed any crimes, but he hadn't committed any crimes, which is why they resorted to mob action. I think Luke is trying to drive a point here to us about what Christian witness should look like.

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He says in James chapter 3, verse 17, that the wisdom that comes down from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.
1 Peter 3, 15 to 16, says this, always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience so that when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.
What's Luke telling us? Christian witness should not be angry or abrasive, but winsome and courteous. Christians should always be open to reason.
[34:32] We should practice active, attentive listening rather than shouting down people who disagree with us. Our witness should be characterized by gentleness, not violent mob action.

When we depose the gods of this world by proclaiming the crucified and risen Christ, his gospel will disrupt society, its economy, and its policy.
verse 35 mentions the sacred stone that fell from the sky that the Ephesians worshipped. It's likely a reference to a meteor that fell maybe into Ephesus that people considered a gift from the gods.
Just think about how sad and ridiculous that is. People created the image of God literally worshipping and bowing down before a rock.
But that's really how foolish all of our idolatries are. Rather than stone that fell from the sky, we have the sun who came down from heaven.
[35:51] Jesus who reconciled us to God the Father by absorbing the penalty for our sins and averting the just wrath of the Holy Father.

And because of Jesus revealed God's will definitively to us, because we have the risen and ascended Christ, we don't have to grope about in the dark seeking, grasping for anything to worship, any sign of the divine, even turning to idols, rocks.
We have the Lord Jesus to proclaim. And because He has all authority in heaven and on earth, we don't need to clamor and fight for power.
As Christians, in the meekness of wisdom, in the power of the Holy Spirit, let's proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and then watch God work.
Behold the work of God. Let's pray together. Amen. God, please, fill us with love for our neighbors that we might be compassionate, provoked by, grieved, aggrieved by the idols that lead them astray and keep them shackled to their sin.
[37:42] Lord, make us men and women who are resolved in the Spirit to do your will and fill us with faith in your power and authority so that we might be able to proclaim the gospel faithfully, even in hostile environments, knowing that you will act, knowing that you will save.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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