

Introduction

A wrestler from Ephesus went to the Games at Olympia one year. Ancient Greek wrestlers wrestled naked, so as to emphasize both the ideal male form and to demonstrate the wrestlers approached one another as equals with neither wearing clothing that signified class or rank. This particular wrestler was dominating his competition. One opponent, a wrestler from Miletus (a city also in Asia Minor), noticed he was wearing an ankle bracelet with some words written on it. These words were significant:

Askion. Kataskion. Lix. Tetrax. Damnameneus. Aisia.
Ephesia Grammata

While the words are significant they are meaningless. They're Greek words—sort of. They're gibberish. They don't mean anything. There is no Greek word “askion”, for example. Ancient authors tried to make sense of these words but they are simply gibberish.

These were the Ἐφέσια Γράμματα—the “Ephesian letters”. They were magical words and were a mantra a person would chant for a variety of purposes. They were significant in the city of Ephesus and in Asia Minor and throughout the Roman world. These words were engraved on the statue of the goddess Artemis in the Temple of Artemis—one of the seven Wonders of the World.

The Artemis cult was incredible as it spread throughout the Roman empire. Many cities had temples devoted to Artemis, though her primary temple was in Ephesus. The Artemis cult began in Ephesus and had significant influence throughout the ancient world.

Because these “Ephesian letters” and their association with Artemis were believed to be magical, the wrestler from Miletus complained to the referee that the Ephesian wrestler had these letters on an ankle bracelet. He claimed this was the only reason he had been dominating the competition. The referee forced the Ephesian wrestler to remove the ankle bracelet. He was promptly defeated three times in a row.

These “Ephesian letters” were everywhere and were often repeated when someone was in trouble. A person who was possessed by demons need only repeat these words as a mantra to cast out the demons. These words were believed to protect against the attack of dangerous creatures and were a protective spell one could cast over one's self. When casting another magical spell, the “Ephesian letters” could protect that spell from interference. The words could be used as an aphrodisiac on an unsuspecting person. They could protect a newly wed couple from danger. The ancient writer Plutarch explained they were able to protect a philosopher against the corrupting influence of bad music.

This was the world in which Paul planted a church in the city of Ephesus. This was the air they breathed, the waters they swam in. Magic and the goddess Artemis and spiritual forces in the unseen world were believed to have a tremendous impact on this world. To interrupt this was to be at odds with what is good and right in the world. Such impiety

was a danger to the right order of society and of the cosmos. Then Paul comes along and declares there is only one God, his name is Jesus, he was crucified by the order of a Roman governor, but he defeated death by rising from the dead on the third day.

It is difficult for us to imagine how world-shaking this proclamation was for the ancient world. Their entire lives were rooted in the belief in magic and the various gods and goddesses who ruled the world. It is difficult to imagine how this belief in magic was so very pervasive throughout everyday life because we live in a scientific age. We live in a world in which science and reason rule our lives. We know we control our own fates and our decisions have the largest impact on our experiences. Unless you're a Scorpio; if so, then "today your mind teams up with your intuition to take you to a fantastical place"—though you should recognize that "under the Pisces moon" your self-doubt at your own genius will be problematic. *Believe in yourself, boo.*

Our text today is in Acts 19.

Acts 19:21 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." ²² And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

²³ About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. ²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. ²⁵ These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. ²⁶ And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. ²⁷ And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" ²⁹ So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. ³⁰ But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. ³¹ And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. ³² Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. ³³ Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. ³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

³⁵ 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? ³⁶ Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. ³⁷ For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor

blasphemers of our goddess. ³⁸ 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. ³⁹ But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. ⁴⁰ 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.” ⁴¹ And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

Acts 19:21–41

A Disturbance

Our text begins “after these events”. Luke is referring to those events we looked at last week. Paul arrived in Ephesus when the Lord determined the time was right. He had long wanted to minister in Ephesus and Asia Minor but had been prevented by the Spirit from going there and when he could go there, he could not stay very long.

When he arrived he found several disciples of John the Baptist who had managed to not hear all of his message and none of the message of Jesus. Paul fills them in, they trust in Christ, and he baptizes them and thus has a new church plant. He began preaching in the synagogue but some became hostile to Christ so Paul took the believers and began renting the Hall of Tyrannus. He did this for two years.

During those two years God was performing incredible miracles through Paul, including healing the sick and casting out demons. When some Jewish exorcists tried to cast out a demon through “the Jesus whom *Paul* proclaims”, they are instead attacked by the demon-possessed man and they fled naked and bloodied. Given the culture of magic and of a strong belief in spiritual forces operating and controlling things in our physical world, the entire city heard this and feared the name of the Lord. Many of them believed and became followers of Jesus.

After the failure of the false exorcists, many of these new Christians determined they would burn their books of magic as an act of public repentance and a show of loyalty to the Lord Jesus. In today’s dollars these books were worth more than nine-million dollars.

It was after these events that Paul “resolved in the Spirit” to go first to Macedonia and Achaia, and then to Jerusalem. His ultimate aim, however, was the city of Rome. Just as he had been prevented by the Spirit, so now he is being led by the Spirit to prepare to leave Ephesus. In verse 22 he sends two of his helpers to Macedonia, though Paul stayed in Ephesus a while longer. It turns out the Lord has something significant for him to experience.

In verse 23 Luke tells us what that is: “About that time there arose no little disturbance”. “No little disturbance” is a neat way to say it was *huge*. It’s like Elon Musk saying, “I have no small bank account” or LeBron James saying, “I have no small ego”. There was a disturbance, and it wasn’t small. Here Luke says it was concerning “the Way”. This was an early term for the growing movement of Christ followers. The term “Christian” was not widely used yet.

Luke says Demetrius was the instigator of this not-little disturbance. He was a silversmith and he says Demetrius “brought no little business to the craftsmen”. That’s an interesting thing to say. This indicates that while Demetrius was himself a silversmith, he had influence over the business affairs of the other craftsmen in Ephesus. In the 1800s a British

archaeologist found a first-century inscription about a Demetrius who was a temple warden in Ephesus. It's quite likely this is the same Demetrius.

As temple warden, he would have been responsible for overseeing maintenance and financial matters related to the temple. He would have been involved in some way with the priests and priestesses, would have interacted on some level with visitors to the temple, and would have enforced temple rules. One must act appropriately in a temple and the temple warden would ensure this.

In short, Demetrius' entire life was wrapped up in the temple of Artemis. He himself made silver shrines of Artemis. These were small silver replicas of her temple. Worshipers would come, buy the little shrine, and donate the shrine to Artemis by leaving it there. The silver could be melted down and used as money or to make other things. Any interruption to this would be seen as a direct threat.

He gathered together the other craftsmen, whether they made silver shrines as well or they worked with other metals or perhaps wood or leather. Remember that magical amulets were also very popular in Ephesus as the city was a center of magic in the ancient world. All of these craftsmen make their money because of the success of the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world. Look again at verse 25.

Acts 19:25 These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. ²⁶ And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. ²⁷ And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

Acts 19:25–27

Here we see the real threat: Paul's preaching is endangering their livelihood. Their real idol isn't Artemis; their true idol, the god they actually worshiped, was money. If Artemis were no longer worshiped, there would no longer be customers and without customers where would their wealth come from?

Not only was the temple of Artemis a center for worshipers who visited Ephesus solely for her temple, the temple itself functioned as a bank. In fact, the ancient writer Aristides called her temple, "the common bank of Asia". People would deposit their money in the Artemision—that's what the temple was called—and could borrow from the bank. It was *the* bank of Asia. The temple and the worship of Artemis were the culture of Asia and they were the *economy* of Asia. Artemis and her cult were interwoven throughout everything in Asia, whether business or finance or personal piety.

When Demetrius says "all Asia and the world worship" Artemis, he's not exaggerating. While Ephesus was the *center* of the Artemis cult, her temples were found in many cities, and they served largely to drive visitors to Ephesus, which further increased the wealth of the city.

A Near Riot

The quickest way to rile up a group of people is to tell them another group is threatening their money. Sales were down and likely temple visits were down. All Demetrius had to do was direct the anger and outrage of his fellow craftsmen to the reason sales were down. In verse 26 he tells them Paul is the reason their income is dropping, for Paul was claiming that gods made with hands aren't gods. Notice that he doesn't say Paul was blaspheming Artemis herself. Paul made the claim that if you make a thing with your hands, that thing *cannot* be a god.

The men he gathered were enraged and they began chanting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Evidently this was a very large crowd as the whole city of 250,000 could hear the commotion. These tradesmen managed to find Gaius and Aristarchus—part of Paul's ministry team—and drag them into the theater. The theater could seat about 24,000 people at a time so it was quite large.

Luke tells us Paul wanted to go into the theater—no doubt to rescue Gaius and Aristarchus by giving himself in their place. He was, after all, the real culprit. He was the one the Lord was using to perform miracles. It was the gospel message he was proclaiming that while it wasn't convincing everyone to follow Jesus was convincing many to stop wasting their money on silver shrines for Artemis. Even further, the magic industry, with its sale of magic books and magic amulets, would have been struggling as people were buying less of these things as well. In short, Paul is the reason for the economic problems in Ephesus and so he tries to offer himself for his ministry partners.

Not only did Paul's fellow believers prevent him from going into the theater, some of the Asiarchs—"rulers of Asia"—urged him not to. Luke says they were friends of Paul. It seems unlikely they were Christians, for Luke probably would have mentioned that. They were likely customers of his tent-making business and perhaps were intrigued by his message, as many in Asia were.

Paul does not endanger himself unnecessarily by entering into the confusion. Luke says the assembly there largely didn't know why they were gathered together shouting: "most of them did not know why they had come together". Demetrius and his gang knew, but most did not.

The Jews apparently knew. Some of the craftsmen may have been Jews. At the time, non-Jewish folk assumed Christians and Jews were largely the same, for both claimed to worship only one God—the God of Israel. Some of the crowd sent Alexander forward to address the crowd. They're in the theater which was designed for the amplification of a person's voice, so addressing the thousands of people present would not have been a problem. It is likely they want Alexander to clarify that their anger toward Paul and his crew should not be directed toward the synagogue and the Jews. When the crowd realized he was a Jew, and because they didn't see much of a difference, they shouted him down and began chanting again, for a full two hours.

The town clerk—an elected position, much like a mayor—finally quieted the crowd and spoke to them. He reminded them they all knew the city of Ephesus was the home of the great Artemis, along with her "sacred stone" that fell from the sky. This was a black meteorite that landed near her temple and was believed to represent her presence among them. He said this is all so obvious that there's no reason to do something foolish.

Think of that claim. They all recognized how great Artemis was. They all recognized how great her temple was. They all recognized her sacred stone was in her temple. What could they possibly need to fear from people like Paul? What could possibly happen to Artemis and her cult? Her temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World! (Here's a picture of what could happen.)

Speaking of Paul, look at what he says. He refers specifically to Gaius and Aristarchus, who preached the same gospel message Paul preached. He says they “are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess”. The word translated sacrilegious means “pertaining to a temple robber”. These men have taken *nothing* from these craftsmen, nor have they taken anything from the temple. Have they lost income? Sure. You can't *blame* these men, however. What he says next, though, is telling.

They aren't temple robbers, he says, but they also have not *blasphemed* their beloved goddess. These men, and therefore Paul, have not spoken “in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, maligns” Artemis. Had they spoken ill of Artemis directly, they could be charged with the crime of impiety.

In the ancient mind, to be impious was to show a lack of respect and reverence for a deity. Centuries earlier the great philosopher Socrates was executed for impiety—ungodliness, a lack of reverence for the gods of Athens. If Paul and his companions had spoken directly against Artemis, there would be grounds for legal action against them.

The clerk then addresses the instigator of this near-riot. He says if Demetrius and the craftsmen he's stirred up have a formal complaint against anyone, they have the proconsuls. These are government officials who can deal with law breakers in the Roman legal system. If they want to bring formal charges, let them bring formal charges, but also let there be none of this lynch mob. He then dismisses the assembly with the warning that they could be charged with rioting, for which there would be severe consequences.

Paul's Message

Let's recap. When Paul arrived in Ephesus he found twelve disciples of John the Baptist—twelve *male* disciples. There were likely women and perhaps children with them. They had no knowledge of Jesus and only limited knowledge of John's teaching. When they hear the full story of John and therefore of Jesus, they believed the gospel and were baptized and so a new church arose in Ephesus. Paul then went to the synagogue where he was able to preach regularly for three months—longer than is usual for him, for he was often chased out of the synagogue much more quickly.

He moved his ministry to the Hall of Tyrannus where he spent two years preaching and teaching. During this time many men and women became followers of Jesus. They recognized the one true God had come to this world as one of us, had lived a righteous life, died as a sacrifice for the sins of his people, and then conquered death itself by rising from the dead. They believed this and so were counted among God's people. The old way of life, however, has a way of sticking around.

After two years of ministry in Ephesus the incident with the Jewish exorcists happened. They tried to invoke the name of Jesus over a demon but weren't actually proclaiming Jesus. They treated the name of Jesus like some magical incantation, as if it were a better version of the so-called “Ephesian Letters”. The demon didn't recognize them, though it recognized

Jesus and his servant Paul. The demon attacked these seven men and sent them running out of that house naked and beaten.

News of this spread immediately. In a culture dominated by magic and an understanding of spiritual forces, this story caused fear among the people—fear of the Lord Jesus, not of the demon. It was clear that Jesus was more powerful for even a handkerchief that touched Paul’s skin could cast out a demon but these Jewish exorcists could not.

It was only after this incredible experience that many of these new believers in Jesus confessed their sins and brought out the books of magic and burned them publicly. As we saw last week, the value of these books was more than nine-million dollars in today’s money. They may have been holding on to them simply for the monetary value or they may have been holding on to them because it’s hard to let go of your former way of life. Either way, it was only at this profound public demonstration of Jesus’ power and authority that they truly gave up this part of their lives.

This singular incident had a tremendous impact on the culture and economy of Ephesus and of Asia Minor. Fewer were visiting the temple of Artemis which means fewer were buying silver shrines to donate to her temple. Fewer were buying magic amulets and magic books. No doubt fewer were paying magicians to cast spells in their favor, whether for “love” or prosperity or simply revenge against their enemies. This was not an organized boycott but a consequence of the gospel being preached.

We can see what that message was—and was not. It is clear from the town clerk’s words that Paul and the church in Ephesus were not blaspheming Artemis. They were not insulting her or calling her or her followers names. There was no need to mock or insult any other deities worshiped by people. It is true that Paul said that gods made with hands are not gods, for that is self-evident. You cannot take a lump of silver and make it into something and claim that something is a god. *You just made it.*

Instead of insulting or putting down the various gods of the world, what did Paul do? If his message was not blasphemous toward the numerous deities worshiped by the world, what was his message? We actually have a significant example earlier in the book of Acts.

Acts 17:22 So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people

everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17:22–31

Paul walked to the Areopagus, knowing these men were there engaged in a discussion about the various gods. We need to recognize something that Luke tells us about Paul’s state of mind. Just a few verses before this he writes:

Acts 17:16 Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Acts 17:16

Paul is distressed over their idolatry! He was disturbed at the paganism on display, but he doesn’t say that directly to them! He knew what foolishness it was to worship these idols, but how he interacted with the people is telling. He acknowledged they were quite religious—they were *devout*. He acknowledged their idols but found a way to proclaim Jesus. They were so concerned with proper worship they had an altar “To an unknown god”—just in case they missed one. They did miss one: the one, true God.

Paul then tells them this unknown God is the very one who created the world. He himself is not created, he is not carved out of stone or wood or fashioned out of metal. He *created* the stone and the wood and the metal. This Creator God doesn’t need a temple. In fact, he doesn’t need *humans* at all! Instead, humans need him for he is the very source of life. Paul says he is the one who has directed human history, with the aim that humans would seek him out.

Rather than insult their religions, Paul quotes one of their poets and a hymn to the god Zeus, and applies them to the one true God. He is the one who gives life to us all and we are his offspring. We did not produce him; he produced us.

This one true God is not made by human hands, for *gods made with hands are not gods*. Paul declares that the time of ignorance is over, for the one true God has revealed himself in Jesus by raising Jesus from the dead. To say this another way, Paul didn’t preach against those gods; rather, he preached Christ and him crucified, and he preached the resurrection of Jesus, which is another way to say he preached the truth that Jesus is Lord.

Application

As I’ve said a number of times, Scripture was not written to us, but it was written for us. There is a lot of new construction in Grand Rapids. There’s over a hundred apartments being built right across the street and there are over 70 “micro-apartments” being built just a block north of us by the brewery. I haven’t heard of any temples to pagan gods or goddesses being built around here.

What I have heard, however, is hostility being spewed out by Christians when they meet or they come across someone who disagrees with their views on social issues or political candidates. I hear Christians respond to unbelievers in anger and fear rather than in a demonstration of love and of patience with those who are lost. One doesn’t have to scroll

very far on social media to see cries of alarm from those who think Jesus is some how in danger of losing control of his world, that if we don't vote a certain way or if we don't oppose the "agenda" of those who "hate" this country or seek to destroy it with their policies or their behaviors then we aren't really "standing up" for Jesus.

In the particular Christian tradition I was converted in, "faithful preaching" amounted to a lot of shouting and this shouting generally consisted of denouncing all the sinners who are ruining this country and trying to implement their agenda. Preaching against the sins that were prevalent in the culture, all the while ignoring the sins that were present in the church, was how one would "stand up for Jesus".

It is true that gods made with hands are not gods. We cannot compromise the truth in exchange for being viewed as "loving" or "accommodating". If we give up the truth in exchange for being accepted, we give up Jesus. We must recognize as well, however, that proclaiming truth without love isn't true. We proclaim the truth of God in Christ but we also *live* the truth of God in Christ. We are part of God's truth, for the gospel is his power to transform the world, and we demonstrate that power as we proclaim Christ by living transformed lives. To proclaim transformation without being transformed isn't faithfulness; it's a lie.

It's easy to point to the hypocrisy of athletes who put Bible verses on their faces during football games or on their sneakers and in the post-game interview thank God and then spew a string of profanities. How many live their lives in a similar manner, though? Maybe they don't spew profanities but they profess faith without living faith.

Gods made with hands are not gods, but when our culture makes an idol out of sexuality this is not license to hate or despise or mistreat people, no matter how loudly or how strongly they advocate for sexual ethics contrary to Scripture. Church, we don't need to blaspheme Artemis to faithfully proclaim Christ. Jesus' harshest criticism was directed to religious hypocrites, not to sinners. In fact, Jesus was known for loving the "worst of sinners"—including Paul, who had been the biggest religious hypocrite of all.

The world is going to hate us. Jesus promised that if the world hated him, it *will* hate his followers. They shouldn't hate us for what we're against, though. They should hate us for what we're *for*, and we should be *for* Jesus.

We put up our Christmas tree yesterday—and by "we" I mean my family, and by "my family" I mean Dawnae. (Don't worry; it'll be down by 9:00AM Christmas Day). Technically it begins next week but the Christmas season is here. It is the season that points to the arrival of our Savior! God, the Judge of all, came to this world as a baby, completely and utterly dependent on his mama. He lived the life we were supposed to live—the life each one of us was supposed to live—and then he died the death we were supposed to die. He was buried but on the third day he rose from the dead.

This means he rose in victory. He is victorious over sin and death. As we'll see throughout the letter to the Ephesians, he is victorious over spiritual forces of evil. He is victorious in heaven and he is victorious on earth. The demonstration of his victory was the patience and love and compassion he showed to the tax collector, to the prostitute, to the angry man, to self-centered, to those filled with lust, to the proud, to those who voted differently from him, to all those who had different values and who made choices that were contrary to his divine nature—to us.

Too many who claim to follow Jesus allow anger and indignation and public offense to

be their main identifier as Christians rather than love. They couch it in “standing up for Jesus” but they’re standing in ways Jesus did not.

The greatness of our Savior demonstrates the depths of our sin. We don’t need to emphasize the sin. We need to proclaim the Savior. Why on earth should we ever waste time ranting and railing about certain sins—almost always sins *we* don’t struggle with? Instead, let us proclaim the good news of a risen Savior who is amazing at saving his people. Let’s proclaim the same hope that Paul and his team proclaimed. If the world will hate us, let it hate us for proclaiming Jesus.