

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday July 9, 2023

Lesson 13: The Mark of a True Christian

Reference: Acts 18:23-19:20

Lesson Supplemental: Nature of Demon Possession

When we last saw Paul, he had concluded his second missionary journey, arriving in Syrian Antioch from Jerusalem after the temple sacrifice to complete his vow (Acts 18:18). This would be around the winter of AD52. Shortly after in the Spring of AD53, Paul would embark on his third missionary journey, retracing his route from his second missionary journey towards Ephesus – a city to which he promised the believers there that he would return with God's will (Acts 18:23 cf 18:21).

Luke informs us that Paul's ministry in Ephesus will last a little over two years (two years + three months 19:8-10). However, Luke also included activities happening in Ephesus beyond Paul the apostle as it relates to the mark of a true Christian, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer. This reality – or lack thereof – can be seen in the education of Apollos and the twelve repented disciples who were baptized by John the Baptist, and in various Jews who tried to use the knowledge about Christ for personal gain.



*Map used by permission

Ephesus in Paul's Time

In the time of Paul, Ephesus was a popular port city where many businessmen journey through towards other destinations. The city had a population of approximately 250,000, ranking behind only Rome, Alexandria (Egypt), and Syrian Antioch in terms of size. Economically, Ephesus was a very prosperous commercial center that has strong impact on the financial affairs of Western Asia Minor.

Ephesus in Paul's time was also renown as being a center of religious / spiritual / magical practices in the Mediterranean world. The practice of sorcery and magical arts was everywhere, being a large part of its culture of folk belief. This practice of magic involves the use and the belief in magical amulets, gems, and other artifacts thought to possess magical powers that can ward off even evil spirits, as well as to grant special benefits through supernatural means, such as prosperity, health, good fortunes and "lucky charms," etc.

Before Paul arrived in Ephesus (Acts 18:24-19:1)

At the end of Paul's second missionary journey, he was accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla from Corinth to Ephesus, where they stayed as Paul makes his way back to Syrian Antioch (Acts 18:19). During this period before Paul makes his way back to this city, a Jewish man from Egypt named Apollos came to the synagogue and began speaking boldly about Scripture. He was described by Luke as being eloquent and mighty in Scriptures; however, his understanding of the gospel was incomplete since he was acquainted only with the message of John the Baptist (18:25). This meant that he likely believed in a Messiah, and possibly that Jesus is the Messiah. He likely preached repentance and faith in the Messiah (message of John the Baptist), but possibly unaware of the full magnitude of Jesus' resurrection and the events of the Pentecost, where the promised Holy Spirit indwelt in all believers.

Priscilla and Aquila took him aside, explained the gospel message to him more accurately. It is possible that in teaching Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila told him about the challenge they encounter in Corinth, especially with the unbelieving Jews. In response, Apollos requested to go across to Achaia (Corinth) to minister to that church and to challenge the unbelieving Jews (18:28) as well as leading others to Christ. Apollos' ministry in Corinth will be one of the central issues that Paul will tackle during his two year stay here in Ephesus. It was during this stay in Ephesus that Paul will author the epistle that we know today as 1 Corinthians.

Paul meets other disciples of John the Baptist (19:1-7)

Apollos was evidently not the only person in Ephesus who had repented and thought they were saved by the baptism of John the Baptist. Upon arriving into Ephesus, Paul encountered twelve men who claimed to be followers of Jesus. Luke provided little details about their background, and they were likely congregating as a small group on their own since Paul did not find them in the synagogue. Something was clearly not complete in their understanding about Jesus Christ that led Paul to inquire about their salvation experience. When Paul learned that their understanding was incomplete, he educated them on the full gospel message (18:3-4), and completed their salvation experience with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (19:6).

Paul begins his ministry in Ephesus (19:8-20)

After the encounter with the twelve followers of Jesus, Paul followed his custom and entered the synagogue, preaching, reasoning, and persuading the members in the synagogue about the true Gospel message. As is the case in his other encounters, not all the Jews welcomed his message. Therefore, after three months of tense debates that included slander, Paul decided to take the believers away and effectively planted a church in a local meeting hall called the school of Tyrannus (18:9). For the next two years, this would be the home base for where the Gospel message is shared (18:10).

Cultural influence and the Gospel Message (Acts 19:11-20)

During this two-year period of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, God had performed many miracles using Paul as His instrument. This plays into the city's dark cultural practices as it relates to their superstition and the practice of sorcery (see Ephesus background above). Given that the residents of the city believed that powers reside in items such as amulets, gems, and other "lucky charms," and also how they observed Paul (rather than God) performing these miracles, the residents begin taking items used / touched by Paul and attribute them to be such amulets that can protect them from evil spirits (19:12).

Taking this practice a step further, some of the Jewish exorcists (note: not believers) took this knowledge of Christ and attempted to use it for their own personal profit. Among these are the seven sons of Sceva – allegedly a Jewish chief priest (19:14). As a chief priest, he should have known better about the dangers of tangling with evil spirits. Yet, he allowed his sons to engage such spirits without the full understanding of how Paul was able to accomplish these miracles (likely dismissed as one of the city's sorcery practices).

Because these seven sons neither knew Christ nor believed in His Gospel message of death and resurrection – and by extension, did not have the Holy Spirit indwelled in them, the evil spirit did not fear them nor anything they speak of. By God's grace, this episode actually awakens many in that society about the dangers of sorcery and entanglement with evil spirits (19:17-20).

Analysis – Acts 18:23-19:22

Luke was not nearly as detailed about Paul's third missionary journey as he was in Paul's first two journeys. Part of this could be that Paul had spent extended periods of time at his last two major stops – in Corinth and now in Ephesus. Paul's extended stay in Corinth was likely due to the tolls of ministry. Here in Ephesus, God kept Paul here for an extended time probably because of the spiritual nature of the city itself, dominated by evil spiritual presence. God needed someone who is spiritually strong and unafraid of the evil presences in the city to plant the seeds and change the culture. From these ministry occurrences in Ephesus, we can observe the following principles as it relates to Christians and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us:

- **Knowledge about Scripture or about Christ is not enough to save a person.** The three occurrences in these passages have one thing in common, and that is that all of them know about Christ. However, as it relates to Apollos and the twelve followers, their salvation journey was not complete as none of them had the Holy Spirit indwelled in them. *The Holy Spirit's presence in a believer is the mark of a true Christian.* One has to receive Christ and be baptized (indwelled by) in the Holy Spirit to be truly saved.
- **Do not tangle with the supernatural, especially if you're not a Christian.** Evil spirits can perform supernatural activities that the world would perceive as sorcery, voodoo, lucky charms, or the likes. When humanity tangles with evil spirits to request supernatural outcomes (prosperity, health, wealth, etc), the best case scenario is that they deceive us into becoming their slave. The worst case scenario is spiritual possession. The Jews who took their knowledge of Christ – without being believers, without the Holy Spirit in them – and challenged these evil spirits are effectively playing with fire. They were lucky to have been able to escape with only physical wounds and humiliation. (See Also Supplemental: Nature of Demon Possession)
- **Changing the venue can open up opportunities for better Gospel ministry.** Paul's encounter with the unbelieving Jews in Ephesus were very much like that in Corinth. The unbelieving Jews lacked nobility and thus, became a serious obstacle to the advancement of the Gospel ministry. Rather than spending time daily bickering with them and absorbing the emotional toll, Paul simply took the believers and started a church plant elsewhere – just as he did in Corinth. In our own gospel ministries, don't be married to the physical location, especially if that current location is an obstacle.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read John 14:15-31. This is the portion of John's gospel where he shared Jesus' promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to those who believe.

1. What can we observe to be the role of the Holy Spirit living in us? What is He actually doing?
2. Based on these passages, can a Christian ever lose the Holy Spirit? Will the Holy Spirit ever leave a believer for sinning or other reasons?
3. Having the Holy Spirit indwelled in us at the moment of salvation is part of the experience of every true Christian. After which, Christians are to learn to "walk" with the Spirit. Refer to Romans 7, how does this dynamic work?

Reflecting Upon our World

The world teaches that knowledge is power. As such, it sees Christianity as another religious knowledge that advocates for the moral development of a person's character, making little – if any – distinction between Christianity and various other religions. Moreover, almost every religion and world view manifests syncretism

1. How does your church explain or exemplify Christian living to a world that does not know about the Holy Spirit?
2. What is your church's view on spiritual warfare, demonic influence, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life?
3. The followers of Jesus that Paul encountered had plenty of head knowledge about Jesus, but they didn't have the Holy Spirit in their life. Many churches today often mistaken Christian discipleship to mean greater head knowledge of Scripture and interpretations thereof (theology). How does your church balance Scriptural head knowledge with the practice of walking with the Holy Spirit (sanctification) for life changing impact?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

1. Reflect on the time when you accepted Christ and received the Holy Spirit. Did the world or the way you see the world suddenly "look" different? Reflect on your salvation experience again and journal it in your daily devotion.
2. Recount on your life today, and compared it to the time before you accepted Christ. Is there a dramatic difference in your life habits? Reflect on this difference as it relates to your "walk" with the Holy Spirit in your life. Start a journal to document your daily walk with Him and cite occasions when He helped you see aspects of the world differently.
3. What is your view on Spiritual Warfare? Have you personally experienced spiritual warfare (conflict in your life that seemed unexplainable by human means, i.e.. what happened to Job)? Reflect on that experience and journal your walk with God to help you prepare for potential future encounters (Ref Eph 6:10-18)