Acts: “Overcoming Cultural Resistance”
Acts 19:17b-41

We have a lot of ground to cover this morning, so let’s jump right to it. As we continue our journey through the book of Acts, our text will be Acts 19: 17b-41. Because our passage is quite long, I will ask you to remain seated and to read quietly along as I read this story aloud. Hear the word of the Lord.

As always, we must begin with some historical context. Remember that the city of Ephesus hosted one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World [http://www.internetmonk.com/wp-content/uploads/ephesus-artemis-temple.jpg](http://www.internetmonk.com/wp-content/uploads/ephesus-artemis-temple.jpg), which was the great Temple of Artemis. As I mentioned last week, this great structure boasted one hundred and twenty-seven marbled pillars that rose sixty feet to support the gorgeous ceiling, many of them inlaid with gold and rare gems. The Temple of Artemis was one of 33 shrines committed to Artemis worship, but it was by far the largest. The Temple of Artemis here in Ephesus was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, and it was, in fact, the largest building in the Greek world! At the center of the temple was the “sacred” stone that supposedly fell from the heavens as we just heard mentioned in the text. Legend states that a meteorite fell to the earth as a large, black stone, sent to the Ephesians from Zeus. The stone either resembled a woman or was carved to resemble a woman. The lower part was wrapped like a mummy with symbols of animals and bees as decoration. The rest of the image was covered with round objects, representing breasts, which symbolized fertility. ([https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2e/Artemis_Efes_Museum.JPG/320px-Artemis_Efes_Museum.JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2e/Artemis_Efes_Museum.JPG/320px-Artemis_Efes_Museum.JPG)). In the classical period of Greek mythology, Artemis was often described as the daughter of Zeus and Leto, and the twin sister of Apollo. She was the Hellenic goddess of the hunt, wild animals, wilderness, childbirth, virginity and protector of young girls, bringing and relieving disease in women. She often was depicted as a huntress carrying a bow and arrows. Among the common people in the ancient Greco world, Artemis was the most beloved and worshipped goddess. Thousands would make the pilgrimage to Ephesus each year to worship at the Temple, and so it stands to reason that much of the economy of Ephesus was based on the Temple and accommodating the many pilgrims who came to town each year. There was one particular week set aside for the pilgrimage called Artemesia. During this week, tens of thousands would flood the city to participate in athletic contests, drinking, carousing, and having a ritual fling with prostitutes (see Hughes, Acts, p 263). This was the Mardi Gras of Ephesus, and it was a BIG money maker.

Now, keep that cultural context in your mind as we look to the text, beginning with vs. 17b: “And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver.”
You can feel the tension already, right? Do you see what is happening in Ephesus? The fear of the Lord has come upon many, many people in the city. God has been moving; the Gospel has been spreading; there have been signs and wonders; and now lives are being transformed. Not immediately…mind you. The text reveals that those who initially became believers did not immediately give up their former habits and customs. However, over time, many believers began to be changed from the inside out. Over time, as the Holy Spirit began to sanctify their lives, many felt compelled—even inspired—to confess their sins and divulge their secret spells and practices, and even to burn their books as a public sign of repentance.

That’s huge. In the ancient world, the power of a spell, curse, or magic formula was based upon its secrecy. As soon as the spell or practice was divulged and made known, it was believed that the power of the particular spell or practice was lost. The magic arts were more than entertainment or cultural expressions in Ephesus…these secret books were the means by which many people made their livings. So it is no small matter when dozens of people come under the conviction that their magical arts are displeasing to God and then decide to burn their books in the public square. Here Luke records that their own estimated value of the books being destroyed came to some 50,000 pieces of silver. That was the equivalent of a single worker’s wage for 137 years without a day off!

Note: neither Paul nor any other Christian leader demanded these new believers to burn their books. We are left to conclude that these new Christians renounced their former practices as a result of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work in their hearts. Luke describes what was happening this way in vs. 20, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.” Let’s hit the pause button for a moment and consider what’s happening with Paul during this time, and then we’ll come right back to the implications of this great God movement in Ephesus and the province of Asia.

So, what does the Apostle Paul think about this great movement of God, the explosive growth in the church, and the radical transformation that is taking place among many of the believers? Look at what comes next in vs. 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.’”

Paul is being Paul! He is not content to pastor a booming church…that’s not his call. He is already looking to circle back to other cities where he has planted churches in order to encourage the leaders…he wants to circle back and visit with the brothers in the Jerusalem church to report on his progress with the Gentile mission…and then he has a vision to take the Gospel to the heart of the Roman Empire…the very city of Rome itself. This is classic Paul…always looking to the next unreached area to spread the Gospel, and yet eager to encourage the leaders who he has put
in place over the churches he planted previously. I imagine it was difficult to even think about leaving Ephesus after 2.5 years of hard work and the amazing success of his ministry, but Paul is convicted in his spirit that his time at Ephesus is drawing to an end. So, in order to prepare for his journey, he sends a few of his disciples on ahead to the cities he will be visiting in order to make preparations as we read in vs. 22, “And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.” We’ll come back to Paul next week, but let us now consider what is happening in Ephesus as Paul is preparing to make his exit.

What we see here in Acts 19 is the predictable consequence of a great God movement in Ephesus.

The radical transformation that is taking place in the lives of many believers in Ephesus is beginning to have a profound effect upon the city, and there are local stakeholders who are quite unhappy about that fact. As we look to vss. 23-27, we learn that a local silversmith named Demetrius is extremely upset about what is happening in the city. As one who made a living by constructing silver shrines of Artemis, Demetrius has observed that his business has been in significant decline recently. So he gathers together other local craftsmen, and this is what he says: “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.”

Now, we’ll need to camp out here at the expense of unpacking the rest of this story, and I’ll tell you why: because what we find here in Ephesus is directly applicable to our own culture and our lives today in 21st century America. Let me show you why. I’ll unpack this for you under three subtitles: 1) The most powerful idols in town; 2) the inevitable cultural resistance to authentic Christianity; and 3) the challenge before us as a church in the 21st century.

I. The most powerful idols in town

…there are three that are revealed here in the text. The first is the most obvious: “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth.” We can go ahead and set aside “Artemis worship” as the primary issue…or Christianity for that matter. Clearly the primary idol that is worshipped in Ephesus and every other town in the world is exactly what Demetrius just said: The Idol of Wealth. What happens when devotion to Christ threatens our wealth or the revenue stream of others? The answer is quite obvious right? MAJOR CONFLICT! Now…at the risk of being misunderstood, please do not write off the New Testament or your pastor as ignorant or idealistic. Both the New Testament and your pastor understand the necessities of business, trade, and commerce. People need to make a living, and I don’t think the New Testament is advocating “anti-business” or “anti-commerce” philosophies.
What we do see here, however, is that the conversation about religious practice is purely secondary to the concerns about finance, and I think that accurately represents most countries, cities, governments, families, and individuals.

Think about it: if the Christians in Ephesus were “theologically” opposed to idol worship, but their convictions did not in any way affect the bottom line of the local economy and/or local business owners, do you think there would be a riot in Ephesus on this day? No…absolutely not. And here’s how we know: the Jews have been in Ephesus for hundreds of years. They are a well established religion in Ephesus with their own synagogue, and they are fundamentally opposed to any kind of idol worship as we all know. But their convictions never threatened the local economy, likely due to their small numbers and their lack of interest in converting the pagan Gentiles. However, when the Christians begin to live out their convictions in a way that negatively affects the local economy, that is, indeed, a cause for rioting.

My point is simply this: as a general rule, theology does not fuel riots…greed fuels riots. As long as the great Idol of Wealth is not threatened, most cities and governments could care a less about your theology. There are certainly a few exceptions in history, but in most cases, if you dig deep enough, many of the conflicts said to have taken place around “theology” were actually conflicts based upon the threatened financial interests of one or both parties. I would love to unpack that further, but on account of time let’s look at the next idol.

Demetrius reveals another significant idol, and that is the Idol of Religious Assumptions. Look at what Demetrius says next, “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.

Notice that the perceived religious threat is not primarily about Artemis (although that is thrown in at the end for good measure); nor is the primary religious threat about the positive message of Christianity regarding the love of God and the free gift of forgiveness given to us in Jesus Christ. Demetrius is concerned because the growth of Christianity is threatening the Idol of Religious Assumptions. And what is the Idol of Religious Assumptions in ancient Ephesus? Demetrius states it clearly: “Everyone gets to create his or her own god, and all gods are to be respected and acknowledged as valid.” Sound familiar? Why is that particular Religious Assumption so important to protect in Ephesus? Because it’s good for business, right! Rampant idol worship is non-obtrusive, it’s non-confrontational, and it promotes both the local economic engine and the “anything goes” culture that the Ephesians have become accustomed to. Again…does any of that sound familiar to our 21st century culture in America? Sure it does. Every culture has an Idol of Religious Assumptions, and it is usually closely associated with the Idol of Wealth.
And that brings us to the third idol of this city that is revealed in the text: The Idol of Culture. Look at vs. 27, “And there is a 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 worships.”

Culture is a powerful force everywhere in the world. No matter where you go, whether you visit a small farming community in Kansas, the great cities of the world, or the remote tribes in Malawi, you will immediately observe that each community is profoundly influenced by the Idol of Culture that is very much there and protected by those who live in that place. Culture is defined by Webster as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time.

Culture is what sets a particular group of people apart from another group of people…it is essentially their “corporate DNA.” Culture is not an idol unto itself, but often times culture becomes an idol. In many respects, the Temple of Artemis represented the Cultural Idol of Ephesus to the degree that their very identity was wrapped up in all the traditions surrounding Artemis worship. No more Temple of Artemis, no more Ephesus as “we know it.”

Think about what would happen if the Chiefs suddenly picked up and moved to Oklahoma City. Arrowhead Stadium wouldn’t even make any sense, right? Why would you name something “Arrowhead” without a team named the “Chiefs?” We would no longer think of ourselves as a city that hosted and cheered on a professional football team…do you think that would affect the esteem of our city’s culture? Absolutely it would. Do you think the negative impact upon our culture would also impact the economic engine of this city? Yep.

It’s important for us to note that these three idols found in any city—The Idol of Wealth, the Idol of Religious Assumptions, and the Idol of Culture—are profoundly connected; and as such, should the conviction and behavior of Jesus-followers threaten any one of these Idols, all three idols are, in fact, threatened.

The Cultural Resistance to the Gospel
And that leads us to our second subheading with a very simple and quick point: cultural resistance to the Gospel is inevitable IF Jesus-followers are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit and allowing that transformation to bring about a change in their lifestyles. Why? Because following Jesus is always counter-cultural to the “ways of this world.” Remember, this “present darkness” as Paul speaks of it in Ephesians 6 is governed by “The Prince of the Air”…the Enemy. A biblical worldview acknowledges that the “Kingdom of Jesus” is not of this world (John 18:36); so whenever the Kingdom of God begins to take root in this world, it is always
counter-cultural to the “natural” tendencies of human cultures, religious practices, and economic systems. Hence, there will always be cultural resistance to authentic Christianity.

Which begs the question: was it the intent of Jesus, our Savior, that His followers stand out, or even stand opposed to the prevailing culture? Did he intend his disciples to challenge common religious assumptions, and when necessary, to influence economic systems of the day? What do you think? Duh…

Think Beatitudes! Matthew 5 “Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake; blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” Doesn’t get any more counter-cultural than that.

Paul writes in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind…”

John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble; but take heart, I have overcome the world.”

Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world…a city on a hill cannot be hidden.”

Again, I could unpack that for an hour, but I think we all know that to follow Jesus in obedience in our current culture is to live in a counter-cultural way…just as it was for the Ephesians.

So, how are we to move forward, given the almost certain reality of cultural resistance and conflict? That leads us to my third and final subheading:

**III. The Challenge We Face in the 21st Century.**

I would submit to you that the challenge we face in the 21st century as Jesus followers is quite similar…remarkably similar…to the challenges of the ancient Christians in Ephesus. We may not have a massive Artemis Temple to negotiate, but we have the same big three Idols to contend with, and the resistance of our culture toward the Gospel is not so different from what we read about in Ephesus.

So…in less than 3 minutes, let me simply point you to a few of the best practices we can glean from the early church as a means of equipping us as the local church in the 21st century to “be a city on a hill.”

First, the Ephesian Christians practiced civility. Note that the Jesus followers in Ephesus never “attacked” or “shamed” the prevailing culture in Ephesus. Had they been systematically
“attacking” the cultural norms, religious assumptions, or economic systems of the city, I doubt this story would have ended the way it did. But listen to what the City Clerk says about the Christians when they’ve been accused of causing trouble: (vs. 27 and vs. 40) “These men (Christians)...are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess...there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.”

The ancient believers knew better than to be attacking, blasphemous, or antagonistic toward the prevailing culture in their city. They exercised civility and often won over the culture after many years of careful and consistent influence.

Second, they courageously demonstrated personal and public conviction.

The Ephesian Christians, who had come under the fear of the Lord, allowed the Holy Spirit to radically change them from the inside out. That was not a one-time event...clearly they surrendered to the Holy Spirit on a daily basis which led to a new way of thinking, believing, and living. Over time, their new identity in Christ led to significant changes in lifestyle including their work, spending, worship, marriage, parenting...everything! Those changes were not just personal changes made in private...those changes were lived out in public. When they burned their books, they did so in the open. When they worshipped Jesus, they did so publicly. When they chose to get married instead of sleeping with prostitutes, they did so publicly. So their transformation was both personal and public...that took courage, and they relied upon the Holy Spirit for that courage.

Third, they pointed the finger at themselves. The Ephesian Christians led with humility, transparency, confession of sin, and divulging their own brokenness. The Ephesian Christians did not lead with condemnation, condescension, or blame towards others. It probably never occurred to the early Christians to do battle with the prevailing culture; they were simply allowing the Gospel to have its way in their lives, and as a result, the culture was changed.

Fourth, they persevered. When conflict arose...and it did regularly...the Christians endured and found their rest in the Lord. They were unflappable. They lived by faith, they lived in close community, they took care of each other and they loved those people in the city that no one else wanted to love. They were hard workers; they were faithful to their employers; their morality was exemplary; and at the same time their kindness, compassion and generosity were famous. They didn’t give up, they didn’t give in, they didn’t blend in...they persevered.

Church, I hope the Holy Spirit has brought as much conviction to your hearts by listening to this message as He brought to my heart in writing this message. Luke-warm, private Christianity that accommodates the cultural idols will never change the world, nor will angry, attacking, blaming Christianity. Let us all commit ourselves to the best practices of the early church, fully
anticipating that cultural resistance will come, with a determination to love the world back to Christ by living authentic Christian lives in community, making our faith public and yet practicing civility. And let’s double down: let’s not quit; let’s not acquiesce to the cultural norms; let’s not blend in…let’s surrender to the Holy Spirit every day and allow Him to have His way in our lives as individuals, families, employers, employees, students, and as a church. Let’s persevere…let’s be a city on a hill… because that’s what Jesus followers do.

Will you pray with me?