

For First Southern Baptist Church on November 22, 2020

Real Repentance and Sincere Faith

I want to welcome you all, First Southern Baptist Church Family, back to my living room. As in the Spring, this is not how church should function. Churches and Christians are meant to gather, but we also want to be wise in these days. In order to love our neighbors and family well, we'll be worshipping in our own homes set apart from one another for at least the next two Sundays due to the COVID-19 pandemic running through our community at this time. My hope is that we'll gather together again on December 6th, and I'll keep you updated if anything changes.

Now, this morning, we're going to continue in Acts where we left off last Sunday. You may remember that last week we left Paul as he was leaving Corinth and traveled back home, to the church in Jerusalem and ultimately his home church in Antioch. On his travels, in Acts 18:19-21, he left the city of Ephesus with a desire, if God willed, to return to that city and do the work of the Lord. After some time with his home church that raised him up, supported him, and sent him out, Paul left to strengthen the churches he had planted and built up on his first missionary journey. This morning we'll get to see Paul's return to Ephesus and the work God did there through him. We're reading this morning from Acts 19:1-20:

“(1) And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. (2) And he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” (3) And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John's baptism.” (4) And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” (5) On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (6) And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. (7) There were about twelve men in all.

(8) And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. (9) But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. (10) This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

(11) And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, (12) so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. (13) Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.” (14) Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. (15) But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?” (16) And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (17) And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. (18) Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. (19) 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. (20) So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”

These verses have four main parts that we'll look at in turn as we follow the flow of the narrative in the text. Paul travels to Ephesus and encounters some disciples of John the Baptist, to whom he preaches the gospel. He will minister in the synagogue and in the city, boldly proclaiming the gospel to all who will hear. Luke will share how the power of God was at work, but misunderstood by some Jewish exorcists. And, finally, how all of that comes together to display the power of God and the truth of the gospel above all worldly religions, beliefs, and systems.

Notice the narrative bridge linking Acts 19, to what we looked at last week. While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul travelled to the churches of his first missionary journey and continued on to return to Ephesus, which he had desired to return to as we've already seen. While there he encountered some people simply called disciples. It seems Paul noticed something is missing which prompts him to ask if they had received the Holy Spirit. Their answer was that they didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit. As Paul dug deeper in verse 3, he discovered they had been disciples of John the Baptist. They had received John's baptism, but had not actually heard the good news of Jesus. In verse 4, Paul described to them the difference between John's ministry and Jesus' ministry. There is a debate among Bible scholars as to whether these disciples are Christians who are simply deficient in their knowledge concerning Jesus like Apollos last week, or if they are more likely not Christians and are in need of hearing that the Messiah has come. To put it another way, the question is are these Jesus' disciples who know little about Jesus, or are they John's disciples waiting to hear of Jesus. It seems to me that the implication in the text is that these disciples are hearing the gospel for the first time. John the Baptist's ministry, which we can read of in Luke 3:1-18, was primarily one of preparation. He saw himself as one simply preparing the people for the coming Messiah. He baptized them as a symbol of their repentance and longing for the coming Christ who would save them. As Paul described John pointing to the one coming after him, Paul made clear that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah in verse 4. It's not simply that they were missing some details about Christian baptism, but know Jesus accurately as Apollos did in the previous verses, it seems they simply did not know Jesus. Repentance and baptism, by themselves, are not enough to save. If repentance and baptism were enough, we would all be in danger of trying to be saved by our good works. These disciples were missing the most essential component of salvation, faith in Jesus. They needed to hear of the Savior, so Paul told them how Jesus lived and died and rose again. By the work of Jesus, salvation was completed on their behalf. They needed not only repentance, but faith in the Savior, which they receive here and then proceed to right baptism in verse 5. After trusting Jesus and being baptized in his name, Paul laid his hands on these men and they received the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Spirit, and the prophesying and speaking in tongues that followed, were an indication of completion of the faith of these disciples and the outward display of the sincerity and reality of their newfound trust in Jesus.

In verses 8-10, Paul observed his usual pattern and went into the synagogue. For three months he spoke to the Jews of Ephesus. He was there to show them that the Scriptures all point to Jesus, the Messiah. He spoke, taught, and reasoned boldly that they might believe in Jesus, whose work was to usher in the Kingdom of God. When opposition arose and some of the Jews in their unbelief began to speak evil of Paul and the Ephesian Christians, Paul moved to the teaching hall next door. The hall of Tyrannus was likely lecture hall where philosophy and rhetoric were taught. This change of location afforded Paul and the Ephesian church a greater audience as they would have had easier access to Greek students and Gentiles who might have avoided the synagogue. We learn from verse 10 that Paul continued teaching in this way for two years. Speaking in

hyperbole, Luke tells us that everyone in that part of the world, Jews and Gentiles, heard about Jesus as Paul continued to speak boldly.

As Paul ministered, God did amazing signs and wonders to confirm and validate the truth Paul was speaking concerning Jesus. Verse 11-12 show that even objects touched by Paul were then able to heal the sick and cast out demons, displaying both the power of God and compelling all those who witnessed such things to think seriously about the gospel. This is where the text takes a truly bizarre turn. In contrast to the genuinely miraculous events happening in Jesus' name alongside of sincere faith in Jesus, these itinerant exorcists attempt to use Jesus' name as a magic spell to cast out a demon. The command the demon in Jesus' name, but they don't know Jesus. Notice the demon's reply in verse 15 that it knew Jesus and recognized Paul, but had no clue who these men were. In a strange, almost reverse exorcism, the demon-possessed man beat and bloodied them, and then cast them out of the house. Their battering which resulted in them being driven out naked, shamed for all to see, seems to be a direct result of them attempting to use Jesus even though they didn't know or trust in him. To heighten their shame at trying to lay hold of the power of God apart from a relationship with God, we learn in verse 17 that the whole city heard of their thwarted attempt. We also learn that even this was used to cause a right fear of God to fall on many in Ephesus and the name of Jesus to be lifted up and praised.

The failure of these exorcists alongside the success of Paul had a dramatic affect on the city, even among the new Christians. Ephesus was known in its day for syncretistic religious practices, where people would take bits from different faiths and religions and mix them together into a hodge-podge spirituality. The Jewish exorcists demonstrated that the mixing of Jewish mysticism with popular magic and the power of Jesus were utterly impotent and powerless. There is only one God, one Lord over all. Jesus' name cannot be invoked like a charm or incantation to effect magical change. True religion is trusting in Jesus, alone, as Lord. As word of the incident spread, we learn in verse 18-19 that many see the futility and wrongness of their magical practices as sin. The result was that many came forward in repentance and burned the tools of their former spirituality. As the books, amulets, charms, and magic spells of the day burned and were reduced to ash, the True Word of God grew. God used all of these things to demonstrate his own power and exclusive authority over all things.

Let me suggest several things we can take away from this text and consider as we apply God's word to our own lives:

1. Repentance and baptism are meaningless apart from sincere faith in Jesus. The disciples of John needed more than just these things in order to truly know God. Their good works and piety were not enough and they were ignorant and unaware of their true need. They had no salvation apart from believing in Jesus and in the same way, there is no salvation apart from sincere faith in Jesus for us. Are we you living unaware of your great need? Are you trusting Jesus alone for eternal life? I once attended a funeral for fellow church member's father. My friend's father was a believer in Jesus and lived a good life before he passed. As I was listening to funeral sermon, the preacher comforted the family and friends of this saint by assuring them that they can know where this brother was in death because of his baptism. After the service ended, my friend turned to me and said "I know where dad is because of who he believed in, not because he got wet that one time." The truth of the gospel does begin with the hard news that we're sinners, separated from God, and his enemies. We do need to repent, but we also need to know that Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that we can have forgiveness and reconciliation with our Heavenly Father. As we consider this text, ask yourself if you were to die today and stand before God, why should he let you into his presence? Too many will look to their baptism, or a spiritual experience, or the decent life they've lived; however, the only reason any of us can

stand before God at the end of our lives is because we have been cleansed of our sin and united with God through Jesus.

2. In a similar sense, we also have to consider if we live like the sons of Sceva. Too many people in the United States in the 21st century would claim to be Christians in name, but not in the substance of their life. We can coast through life thinking we've got God on our side, yet when real trial comes along the only hope we have is in a real relationship with the Living God through faith. Too many will be humiliated before God's throne because they claimed his name, but He never knew them. May that never be true of us. Saving faith must be a part of your personal journey with the Lord. You can't inherit it from godly parents. It won't rub off from a God-fearing spouse. Like we've already said, you can't earn it by going through the motions of religion. You, and you alone, have to take a long hard look at yourself, and more importantly, a long hard look at Jesus and ask, "do I really believe in Jesus?" And also, "do I live like I believe Jesus rose from the dead?" Vicariously knowing Jesus through Paul did not help the exorcists. Knowing Jesus at a distance or through someone else will be equally meaningless to you as you walk through life.
3. The real heart of this moment in redemptive history is how God displayed his glory profoundly in Ephesus. His grace made John's disciples new. His love met with Jew and Greek alike, both in the synagogue and the lecture hall. His power was on display through miraculous healings and casting out demons through his faithful saints. Finally, his authority was seen as far surpassing everything the Ephesians had ever known. How could their gods, their magics, their superstitions compete with the King of kings and the Lord of lords? This display of the power, glory, and majesty of God led to men and women rightly fearing the Lord and experiencing true salvation in the name of Jesus. When we're tempted to despair over the condition of our culture, or the seemingly insurmountable task of making disciples, we have an impossibly strong ally on our side. The Holy Spirit who empowered Paul to do the work in Ephesus indwells all Christians. If you're discouraged, let me challenge you to spend less time watching the news, and more time looking long and hard at Jesus. Consider the words of Martin Luther penned almost five centuries ago: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing. You ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he; The Lord of Hosts his name, from age to age the same; and he must win the battle." Abide in him, brothers and sisters. He must and He will win the battle.

I'm praying for you this week and I hope you have a happy Thanksgiving. God bless you!

Sincerely,

Bryan McClelland

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