

Sunday, July 5, 2026

Irrational Idolatry

Acts 19:17-41

- We are heading off to youth camp after the service today...and its always such a great week and it's impossible to come back without stories
- Like last year, Jace when he had a laughing spit take in the back of the church van and spit his frosty all over Emma
 - These are memories that will last forever!
- And one of my favorite stories from a youth trip, was years ago when I was a youth pastor in Shelby, we took a group of students to Gatlinburg, TN for the Xtreme Winter conference
 - And I normally kept the younger middle schoolers with me, and I had one boy who

you could tell this was really his first trip away from home

- And his older sister was there and she was going with a different group so she gave her brother some food money
- And you could tell that he was very uncomfortable holding this money but I told him it was ok and I would help him.
- And we are at a restaurant the first night and its a order and pay at the counter type of place...and he walks up to the counter, orders his burger and fries and then just puts a few dollars on the counter and walks away
- I look at the cashier and say, that's not enough money is it....she says, "No..." So I just covered the rest
- The next evening we are at a Bubba Gump Shrimp Co for dinner, and then he gets his bill
 - And it's like almost \$30 because he ordered something ridiculous....and he gets his bill and he only has a \$10 and a \$5 in the sleeve

- And I say “No, man...you gotta put more money in there.”
- “Look, you have a \$20 dollar bill here, just add that in there and that will cover the meal and the tip”
- And he says, “Ohh ok,” and we put all three bills in there...then as he’s handing the check back to the waitress...he pulls the \$20 bill back out.
- And I say, “Buddy! You can’t do that! You gotta pay what it costs!”
- And he wasn’t arguing with me, he was agreeing with me the entire time, but he like three times, pulled cash away while we’re trying to pay the bill!
- It was a wild experience!
- But I also think that is a picture of what it looks like in the lives of many modern day Christians
- When it comes to actually surrendering to Jesus, giving everything to Him—We say we

want Him to be Lord of all, but then we keep trying to keep a little bit back for ourselves

- Many people do not understand what the life of a Christian is actually supposed to be like, because we don’t want to give our lives to Jesus, we want to just add Jesus to ours.
- But Jesus cannot be added, He demands complete surrender
 - He is either Lord of all or He is not Lord at all
- We see in Acts 19, a group showing a complete surrender —and a group that shows a complete contempt for what the Gospel does
- If you were here last week we talked about how there were these Jewish exorcists that tried to invoke the name of Jesus and Paul to have power over unclean spirits...but the demon answered them saying, “Jesus I know, Paul I know, but who are you?”
- Then the demon possessed man, beat them up and sent them running away naked.

- And verse 17 says, ***“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. 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. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.” -Acts 19:17-21 (ESV)***

- Now — last week we explained that Ephesus was a city that was known for its obsession with magic and the dark arts
- The Ephesians were known for the Ephesia Grammata—or “Ephesian Writings”
 - These were spell books that were full of instructions of how to perform cultic rituals, invoke spirits, cast off spirits, perform

curses, influence lovers, or heal sicknesses, or anything of the like

- These writings were full of magical words and formulas that would mostly sound like nonsensical babbling
 - But if you said them just right, the thought was you could perform magic or have “spiritual power”
- So people would spend fortunes on these spell books, but now after coming to an acknowledgment of the Power of Jesus a complete revival is breaking out in Ephesus
- THE GOSPEL IS ALL OR NOTHING**
- We see these Ephesians going all-in
 - We see true repentance in them—which, if you remember, literally means to change one’s mind
 - That’s why we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds

- Many of these Ephesians have had their minds transformed...they realize that the way that they thought about life, the way they thought about morality, the way they thought about magic and what they desired was wrong
- They confessed that Jesus' way is better than their way
- They exposed their dark practices to the Light of Jesus and allowed Him to reorder their entire lives
- And we cannot underestimate how radical of a situation that is happening here in Ephesus
 - When it says that they burned their spell books that was a value of a total of 50,000 pieces of silver...that was 138 years worth of a working man's wage
 - In today's context this would be just shy of \$14 million dollars worth of spell books
 - This is an absolute fortune that is going up in flames
- And not only were these books expensive...by burning them in this way, these Ephesians were publicly turning away and renouncing magic and the dark arts
 - They were turning away from paganism
 - *They were renouncing Artemis.*
- Artemis, also known as Diana—had one of the biggest religious cult followings in the world
- There were 39 different shrines or Temples dedicated to her scattered all throughout the Roman Empire —but the home base for her worship was Ephesus
- Ephesus was the home to **HER MAIN TEMPLE** that was 4x larger than the Parthenon at 93,000 square feet...it was one of the 7 wonders in the ancient world
- People would travel to Ephesus just to see it's magnificence
 - This temple was the centerpiece of the city, and her **IMAGE** was the centerpiece of the temple

- The legend was that this statue depicting Artemis fell from the heavens and was sent by Zeus himself.
- And this ancient statue from the temple in Ephesus is currently on display in the Vatican...which is strange to me
- However, Artemis was thought to be the daughter of Zeus and the twin sister of Apollo
 - She was thought to have been born in the woods just outside of Ephesus
 - And she was the goddess of fertility
- She was known as the mother and protector of Ephesus
- She was the cultural and economic identity of the city
 - Everything about their lives was revolved around her
- In Ephesus their Artemis worship was tied into their:
 - Trade and Commerce
- The Temple actually served as the largest bank because people feared her and their money and valuable would be safe there
- So the temple priests controlled the wealth of the city
- Their festivals and national celebrations would all be centered around celebrating Artemis
- Their politics revolved around her
- Their family life revolved around her
 - Every family would have a personal backyard shrine for Artemis
 - When a young woman was about to get married, she would cut off a lock of her hair and take a personal garment and offer it to Artemis at her temples to ask her for help, protection, and fertility over her new family
- Artemis was the social identity of the city

- Everyone worshipped her—you see, in this day and age there was no such thing as private religion
- Today, much of our society makes faith out to be a personal and a private matter...but that would have been very countercultural
- For them, to worship Artemis was to be Ephesian
 - To reject Artemis, was to reject Ephesus—this would be, to many, like refusing to celebrate the 4th of July or rejecting the American flag
 - When one would convert to Christianity—they weren't just changing belief systems—they were rejecting an entire ecosystem
- The Ephesians saw Artemis as the giver of abundance and life
 - So if enough people turned away from her, the thought would be that crops would stop growing, plagues would ensue, the city

would have no protection, and the economy would collapse

- And Paul has been in town for a few years now, and he's been teaching in the Hall of Tyrannus and he's influencing a lot of travelers
 - But he didn't seem to be much of the threat to the direct business of Ephesus
- Until now—people are publicly burning their very expensive spell books, renouncing paganism and dark magic and extolling the Name of Jesus—not Artemis.
 - But they knew, that it was all or nothing! There's no way that they could follow Jesus—and keep their spell books
 - There's no way that they could worship Jesus—and still keep their Artemis shrines
- I remember when I was 18, and I had gotten myself in enough trouble and I knew that it was time to really get things together and give my life to Jesus

- I still had things that I was holding on to. I had lies that I was still trying to tell, some habits I didn't fully want to let go of
- And it was my brother Dewey, who was going through it with me, and said, "Kenny, it's all or nothing. If we are really going to make a change in our lives we gotta go all in."
- So we had to confess all that we had done, had been doing, had to let it all go...give it all over to Jesus and my life has never been the same since.
- And now, I can look around at my life and confidently say that there is nothing that can be explained about my life without Him
 - Where I live, what I do, who I am married to, my boys, my family living near me, my friends, my house, all that we have
 - There is absolutely nothing about my life that doesn't have His fingerprints all over it...and its the most encouraging place to be
- You see these Ephesians, don't have to look to Artemis for the hopes of magic, fertility, for national and spiritual protection anymore
 - Because now they know that the God who made everything has provided for them everything that they need—there's more power in the name of Jesus than any spell book, it's God who gives life, and He deserves all of our praise
- So as a result, many people have stopped buying idols—and are convincing others not to as well
- And there in lies the rub—not only is the normal Ephesian way of life at risk— some prominent business men are starting to take a hit in the wallet
- So as Paul begins to make plans to leave town —trouble starts to brew
- ***"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.” -Acts 19:23-27 (ESV)

- So once again, the truth is being opposed—primarily because of Money
 - We’ve seen it happen to Jesus, we’ve seen it happen to Peter, we’ve seen it happen to Paul

- Now, Demetrius was most likely the head of the silversmith’s guild
 - Demetrius wasn’t concerned about his beloved Artemis, or he would have led with that
 - Instead, he says “Guys, we’ve become rich off of this idol making business—and now that business is at risk...” and then after he appeals to their wallet, then he covers it in religious talk
- Money was his worship—money was his god
- I had a pastor tell me one time, he said, “Some people will hate you when you talk about money because they don’t like you talking about their god”
- There’s a reason why Jesus said, on the the Sermon on the Mount: ***“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” -Matthew 6:24 (NIV)***

- Even Demetrius couldn't really serve both Artemis and money—one would always take precedent
- But he was used to a certain lifestyle, a certain income, a certain routine—he liked his life and now this Paul is spreading this message that is threatening everything that he knows and loves
- But that's what the Gospel does, and it's why so many oppose it:

- THE GOSPEL THREATENS OUR WAY OF LIFE

- There is nothing within the human nature that wants to surrender and submit to a lordship other than ourselves
 - We want to make the rules, we want to determine our truth, we want to live a life based on our feelings, what we like, and what we want
- In short we want to be God
- So in turn we will spend so much of our lives trying trying to find ourselves, be true to

ourselves, find what we really want out of life... but the reality is, the only way to have an abundant life is to find out what God wants for your life.

- We as the created, will only understand our purpose and our identity if we understand our Creator
- Fletcher is really getting into legos. Rachel thought it would be fun to sign him up for a free lego magazine subscription—which has only resulted in him constantly wanting legos to be delivered to the house
- And it's kind of annoying, how complicated these lego sets can be. Even for the small 3-5 year old sets
 - And have you ever tried to put those together without looking at the instruction manual??
 - I tried over Christmas, Fletcher got this simple little lego set—I thought I'd put it together real quick, I didn't need directions—

- *We'll like an hour and a half later I'm probably fussing and crying more than Fletcher is wanting this thing to be done!*
- But trying to go through life without God, is like trying to figure out everything without the instruction manual
 - It's just going to get more confusing and more frustrating the longer that you go on
 - But we resist it so much—because living for God and surrendering to Jesus goes against our human nature, our societal norm, and our inherently desired way of life
- Jesus' teaching always seemed to be so upside down:
 - *The way to gain life, is to lose your life*
 - *The way to freedom is through submission to Him*
 - *The way to become great is to make yourself the least*
- *The only way to truly find yourself, is to lose yourself in service to God and others*
- *The best way to take care of your needs is to take care of the needs of others*
- It seems so backwards!
- But when you experience the power, love, and grace of Jesus Christ—all of the sudden there is a complete reordering of everything and it now makes common sense to renounce our human nature, renounce the social norm, and our desired way of life
 - Like these believing Ephesians we burn away what we thought would give us power, purpose, and fulfillment in life—and we turn everything over to Jesus
- And when that happens, there will be those like Demetrius—who will oppose what God is doing
- *Its funny to me that he can't help but admit Paul's success*

- And he reiterates Paul's teaching that we saw him tell the Areopagus in Athens that ***"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."*** -Acts 17:29 (ESV)

- Apparently this has been catching on, people have been coming to the acknowledgement of this truth...and Demetrius doesn't seem to care if its actually true or not, all he sees is a threat to his paycheck
- And apparently he has enough influence to rile up a crowd

- ***"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, 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!" - Acts 17:28-34 (ESV)

- Now, **THIS THEATRE** which you can still visit today was the largest public gathering place in the city...and one of the largest amphitheaters in the Roman Empire
- This is where the city would put on their dramatic and musical performances, also hold their civic meetings and political

announcements, this would be the main site for the festivals and also the public debates

- Gathering here, would make this an official city meeting
- Now, they want to drag Paul before this mob, but they don't find him—they find some of his friends and drag them into the amphitheater, in his stead
- And Paul wants to go in there himself, but the other Christians won't let him—it's too dangerous
 - Even the Asiarchs, who were in British terms like the Duke's and Duchess's of the time. These were those who were from the prestigious and most influential families who had non-elected political influence and were in charge of the festivals, public entertainment, and celebrations that honored Rome.
- These are some of the richest and most powerful people in the city, and even they are concerned for Paul's well being

- Luke tells us that they were his friends!
- You can see just how much of a contrast Luke is showing us between true Christianity and those who oppose Christianity
 - Paul reasoned, peacefully, in the Hall of Tyrannus at a time that would not inconvenience anyone
 - He wasn't causing any trouble—even the civic leaders considered him a friend, so in many ways he was a benefit to the society
- But Luke shows us such a blatant contrast between the reasonable and the irrational
- Paul had been reasoning the Gospel—and his influence led people to burn \$14 million dollars worth of something that they had believed their entire lives
 - Now, the reasonable would stop and say—“hold up, I know many of these people, I know what the Ephesians are like, what could cause them to have such a dramatic change of heart? Could this be true?”

- But the irrational say, “Nope, it's effecting my money, we don't want anyone to change— this has to be stopped.”
- And we know that this is irrational because verse 32 is my favorite part of this entire section when it says: ***“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.” -Acts 19:32 (ESV)***
- It's impossible not to see how little things have changed over the years.
 - *Some of my favorite videos that I see posted are those who go to some of these political rallies or protests and they are asked details about what they are protesting—and everyone gives a different answer, they give contradicting answers, and most people don't know why they're angry they just want to be angry... “so we're gonna make our voice heard!” Heard about what, They don't know!*
- But this thing is getting out of hand and the crowd wants this man Alexander to address the crowd.
- Now, this Alexander is most likely not a believer, all that we know is that he is Jewish, who is probably part of the Jewish synagogue that came against Paul that caused him to go over to the Hall of Tyrannus
 - So the Jews wanting to distance themselves from Paul, put Alexander before the crowd... and this is very likely the Alexander that Paul writes to Timothy about later while Timothy was Pastoring the church in Ephesus
 - He says that this Alexander has done him much harm and he has delivered him over to satan,
 - And one of the telling things that would lead us to believe that this Alexander was one in the same was the fact that Paul refers to him as Alexander the Coppersmith
 - He would have been a tradesmen, like the silversmiths that Demetrius has riled up

- So Alexander steps up to give a speech, probably to condemn Paul and his people more and save his own skin
 - But when the crowd catches wind that he is a Jew—he doesn’t get to say a word
 - Because they all knew that true Judaism refused idol worship—they were to worship God alone and no graven images
 - So even though they had existed freely and peacefully in Ephesus all of this time and just had their own place of worship in the Synagogue—at this point, its Artemis or nothing
 - They didn’t care if there was any difference between Jews and Christians—both to them were anti-Artemis
- So 25,000+ just start chanting “great is Artemis of the Ephesians” for about 2 hours
 - Just over and over and over again
 - I can imagine how deafening this chanting could have been
- But this type of chanting in this culture was a way to reaffirm their devotion and loyalty to Artemis
 - They were trying to appease any offense that may have been done to her
 - But it’s the irrationality of idolatry because while Paul spends two years, reasoning, teaching, answering questions, opening dialogue, allowing people to come voluntarily
 - The idolatrous crowd instead just gets loud and confusing
 - This is essentially 25,000 covering their ears saying, “La, la, la, la....I don’t want to hear it!”
- The town clerk in the remaining verses essentially has to talk down the crowd, tell them that these guys have done nothing wrong...if a formal complaint wants to be filed, the courts are open—but they need to disperse because their about to get the whole city in trouble with Rome for unjustly rioting.

- And it's funny because they have this riot to accuse Paul and the Christians of disrupting the social order...but they were actually the ones being disruptive
- But that's what happen when you mess with peoples idols
 - And if we think that we as a society have grown past the issue of idols—we are so wrong
- Idolatry just mainly manifests itself in a different way than graven images and statues—and mainly today:
- **OUR IDOLATRY IS IN OUR IDEOLOGY**
- By definition, ideology is—“a systematic set of beliefs, values, and ideas that shape how a group or individual interpret the world and organized society”
- What people do, is create their own world view, or adapt the world view of another—and they form an opinion on how the world should

work, on morality, sexuality, politics, education, family, and social matters in general

- And as soon as we put what we think above what God says—that's the very moment we have fallen into modern day idol worship
- If there is anything that you identify with that takes precedent to your identity in Christ—its become an idol
- You'll hear it all the time: “I'm a Progressive Christian” or “I'm a Conservative Christian”
 - If the ideology takes precedence then you will allow your faith to come 2nd— and you'll let the ideology set the tone for your faith, rather than letting your faith set the tone for how you see and view things
 - So you should be a Christian first and foremost—and if you reprioritize to being a Christian ultimately—that may lean progressive or a Christian that may lean conservative

- Then you will let what God says bring some balance to your viewpoints and you'll probably act, look, and interact with others a little more Christ-like
- The only reason why the LGBTQ thing has become such an issue—is because we have allowed sexuality to become a societal idol
 - We have turned sexuality into an identity—which it is not
 - Our identity is we are human beings made in the image of God
 - That is our identity—but if we remove God and try to put together our lives without the instruction manual, we lose any foundation of an identity so we look to things like sexuality to find it in
- It's also why any sexual activity outside of a marriage between a man and a female is so widely accepted
- This is what Christians are so bad about doing—and that is understanding that a sexual

relationship between a man a woman outside of marriage is just as much of a sin as homosexuality is

- Sexual sin is sexual sin—*“but because its at least a man and a woman we can down play it and make it seem like its not so bad”*
 - And more and more we accept it as becoming just a normal part of culture
- Because we have turned sex into an innate need rather than a complementary gift from God...which is what we are supposed to see sex as, a gift from God, that is best expressed in the context in which it was designed for.
- I've heard it said, “Idolatry isn't about bad things—it's taking good things and making them ultimate things”
 - Things like sexuality, which is a good thing, has been elevated to an ultimate thing—a defining thing, therefore it has been taken out of its designed context and become a confusing idol.

- Dr. Tim Keller said, **“If there is anything other than God that is functionally more important to your happiness, identity, hope, or meaning, that is functionally your god.” -Dr Tim Keller**
- And we don’t only do it with things like politics and sexuality and controversial issues—we do it with good things—we do it with family
 - The reason why divorce is so acceptable is because we have bought into an ideology that our relationships are about our personal happiness more so than sacrificially loving another.
 - So many parents will not biblically discipline their children, and train them in the way that they should go, because we’ve created our own ideology on parenting or saw a tik-tok video that we have allowed to outweigh the word of God
- We come up with our own ideas of what family is supposed to look like—instead of the biblical design of one man and one woman
- In which the Father is supposed to reflect Jesus as the Authority of the house that sacrificially loves his family and lays down his life for his bride
- The Mother who respects and supports the Father’s leadership and they as a team discipline and teach and disciple their children
- And the children honor and obey their parents
- Well today —we see too often children who are the authority, there is no teaching or discipline, and the parents just obey their children.
- And it’s become normal, for reasons beyond me —to buy into an ideology that a 7 year old knows what’s best for themselves and can determine their own truth
- It’s the irrational chaos that ensues from idolatry—which is again is all of the things that we allow to superseded God, and His Word, and His Will, and His Ways in our lives

- But the reality, is the real idol that we are worshipping—is not politics, sexuality, money, greed, or our kids

- THE MAIN IDOL WE WORSHIP IS THE IDOL OF SELF

- Why do you think abortion has even been allowed to be a thing?
 - You know, I have been going through Ezekiel in my personal reading, and this book and other parts of the old testament note how time and time again—when the Israelites would fall into idolatry, so often it would lead them to eventually getting to such a dark culture that child sacrifice became acceptable practice
 - And if you do not think that abortion is modern day child sacrifice—I would encourage you to challenge your ideology
- Now, I know the general arguments of rape, incest, and threat of life to the mother

- Now—take all of those off of the table—because according to research those three incidents combined are still less than 1% of the reason why abortions happen
- According to the Guttmacher Institute—the top reasons why most abortions happen is because of financial concerns, no desire for a larger family, the baby would interfere with education or career, fear that the father won't stay, or just generally feeling unready to be a parent
 - So that tells me that the overwhelming majority of abortions happen because they sacrifice a child to the idol of self
- But for anyone who may have fallen victim to this type of ideology that our idol ridden culture has shoved down your throat—there is hope, there is forgiveness....So many of these Ephesians had participated in this paganism and darker practices than we could ever imagine

- But they repented, burned the books, and turned to Jesus and received grace, forgiveness, and acceptance...they were not defined by their past, they were given a brand new life! In a way that was shaking up an entire society!
 - But also, like the others— there will be those that will be so stuck on the ideology of idolatry that they will just get angry and loud and just refuse to listen to reason...because it goes against what they want
- There is no form of idolatry that cannot be traced back to the idol of self.
 - We'll chose what we want to love most and we will worship it
 - We'll worship a career, a way of life, a partner, a child, a goal, a dream, an ambition —all because it's what we want
- This is nothing new—we talked about this a few weeks ago. Even in ancient Greece, whatever god they worshipped was always traced back to something about themselves.
- They would worship and sacrifice to whichever god best suited them:
 - If they were fisherman, they would sacrifice and worship Poseidon—the god of the sea
 - If they were farmers, they would worship Demeter—the goddess of the harvest
 - If they were scholars, they would worship Athena—the goddess of wisdom
- So the reality was—it wasn't these gods that they were worshipping, it was themselves. Their desires—what they wanted from these god.
- They, as we are today—were ruled by self.
- And the only answer that there is to this idolatry... that each and every one of us are so prone to—is not to love things less
- It's not about lowering your career, or your passion for the good of the world, or your children, or your family, or your goals or your dreams, or yourself in general

- No—it's not about loving things less—it's just about loving God more
 - It's about allowing Him to truly be the ultimate thing in your life. It's about surrendering everything to Him
 - It's about saying, *“Lord, I have had my own ideology about morality, sexuality, family, and life in general”—but I’m giving all of that over to you—you set the tone for how I think about these things and how I live this out!”*
 - And what you will come to realize is that when God becomes the ultimate in your life—you will love all of these things even better
- Because the Creator—the Writer of the instruction manual will not just show you exactly how to put together all of the pieces of your life, but He'll do it with you