

Title: God's love changes a city.

Text: Acts 19

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If you follow the news much then you know that last year, many of the major cities in the US were in a bidding war trying to bring **Amazon's** next headquarters to their town. Amazon said they were looking for a new city to call home, where they would invest five billion dollars into the local economy and create at least 50,000 new jobs. More than 100 different cities began vying for the honor, doing anything and everything possible to be selected. **New Jersey (IMAGE)** offered seven billion dollars in tax breaks, the **mayor of Kansas city (IMAGE)**, Sly James, purchased 1,000 different items on Amazon and left product reviews for each of them, but instead of reviewing the products, he left reviews of his city, extolling the virtues of Kansas City and all it has to offer. Perhaps my favorite enticing ploy was used by Tucson, Arizona, who decided to send Amazon a gift, and what does every 900-billion-dollar company really need?? **A 21-foot-tall cactus (IMAGE)**. All of these cities wanted Amazon to come because when you bring a huge employer like that, it changes the city.

Companies aren't the only thing that can change a city. Think about what happens when a town is chosen to host the **Olympics**. In 1996, hosting the Olympics turned Atlanta into a truly global city. Or think about 2012, when our town was chosen to host the **Superbowl**. It infused tens and tens of millions of new dollars into our economy and infrastructure. It changed part of our downtown landscape (none of it has gone to fixing our potholes!) When you bring something new to a city, it can change the city. Here's my question for today: **What happens when the gospel comes to a city?**

If you have your Bibles, open them with me to Acts 19, and we are going to get to see a case study. We are in the second week of a sermon series on Ephesians. Ephesians 1:1 says this: **"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus."** So before we jump into the rest of the letter, we want to understand more about this city.

Let's journey to the city of Ephesus (GOOGLE EARTH). This is Ephesus today, but what was it like in Paul's day, when he wrote this letter? Take a look at these **ancient city streets**. I actually took this picture when I was there a few years ago. The city was so wealthy that many of their streets were actually mosaics. They walked on their artwork. Ephesus was home to the **third largest library** in the world, containing 12,000 scrolls. And they also had a **stadium** that could fit more than 24,000 people, thousands more than Bankers Life. Ephesus was widely considered the third most important city in the world, after Rome and Alexandria - the ancient equivalent of LA or London.

Anytime we are traveling on an interstate, we see **these**. These are mile markers. And the numbers tell you how many miles you are away from the state's border. **Mile markers started in the Roman world**. And for many of them, the number on the mile marker represented how far away they were from city of Ephesus. That's how important this town was.

As a missionary, Paul's strategy was to go to the cultural, political, and economic centers of his world, preach the gospel there, plant a church, and then go to another major city and repeat the work. In Acts 19, Paul comes to Ephesus. Let's read about it: **While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. 4 Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.**

So when Paul gets to Ephesus, he found some people who were called disciples. But they weren't disciples of Jesus, they were disciples of John the Baptist, the man who came before Jesus and told his followers to prepare the way for Jesus. When John saw Jesus, he told his followers, "There he is. That's the Messiah. He's the man who will take away the sins of the world. You have all been following me, but I'm not even worthy to untie that man's sandals." So that happens in the year AD 27; John told everyone who was following him to follow Jesus. Guess what year this passage is describing?? AD 52. Somehow or another these people heard part of John's message but not all of it. They knew they were supposed to wait for the Messiah, but they didn't know that the Messiah had come. They had been waiting for 25 years (Guys you thought waiting for your wife to get ready for a date took a long time...think about it! It's Mother's Day, I shouldn't have said that) for the Messiah to come, waiting, waiting, waiting. And then Paul shows up and tells them...y'all haven't heard...the one John told you about has come. Place your faith in him. These men believed in God; they were open to God. They just didn't know the full gospel; they only had part of the information. When they heard it, they were baptized and the Holy Spirit filled their life in a powerful way. Can you imagine what that must have been like for them? All that waiting. All that hoping. All that praying. Then the promises finally became real. God came into their lives.

After this, Paul spent about three years in the city, teaching and preaching and telling as many people as he can about Jesus. But just like in today's world, whenever something genuine and sincere is taking place, counterfeit looking to exploit the situation always pop up...**13 Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out."** So there is this group of people who did not follow Jesus, but at the same time were fully aware of the power in his name. Imagine a modern day psychic or someone claiming to read horoscopes or tarot cards ...These people knew about spiritual realities...and they said, "Oh, there is this new guy in town, and when he preaches in the name of Jesus, he has incredible power. So we are going to add the name of Jesus to our spiritual repertoire and incantations. We are going to start talking to the evil spirits and see what happens." It didn't turn out so well for them! **14 Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. 15 One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" 16 Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.** Now that's almost comical. These religious con men are going around, claiming

to have spiritual power, and an evil spirit beat them up and exposed them as charlatans and hucksters.

As these religious pretenders were licking their wounds, other people were having their lives changed. **18 Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. 19 A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.** These people used to engage in the occult practices. They are renouncing their former religious commitments and turning to Jesus. And it came at great personal cost. **When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.** In modern currency, we're talking about roughly \$7.5 million. The gospel radically transformed these persons' lives, it didn't matter what price they had to pay! (Back in the 90s someone would preach a powerful message and all the teenagers would go home and throw out their rap CD's. No more Coolio for me! What would that look like today? It would be like a teenage boy deleting Fortnite. Think about a college-age girl giving up Instagram. No more storylines! No more filters! This is like grown women deleting their Pinterest account. Men, this is like you deleting your ESPN app. (Some of you are on that right now!!) It didn't matter how much value these things once had. They were putting Jesus first, no matter the cost.

The gospel was making an undeniable change! Take a look at this final story...**23 About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way.** (That's what they called Christianity.) **24 A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. 25 He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: "You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. 26 And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. 27 There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty."**

So this guy named Demetrius was a silversmith, and he made little shrines for the patron deity of the city of Ephesus, a goddess known as Artemis. Here's what you need to know about **Artemis**. The people in Ephesus recovered a meteorite that had a lot of bumps on it. They thought it was their goddess's way of communicating with them. They assumed all the bumps were breasts, so this is the statue they made for her, she was literally referred to as "the many breasted one." She was a goddess of fertility; she was worshipped through cult prostitution. In the 1st century, she was the most worshipped goddess in the world. And where was her temple? Right in the center of the city of Ephesus. **This is a model of it.** Three times the size of the Parthenon: 450 feet long. 225 feet wide, 127 columns, each more than 60 feet high and meticulously carved by hand. Her temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. People would travel the world over to worship at this temple. When they came to the city they would buy a small statue of the goddess, made by a local silversmith like Demetrius. They would go into the temple, offer a sacrifice, and have their statue blessed. Then they'd take it home and have a holy relic.

So what Demetrius is doing in our passage is saying to all the people in Ephesus who made a living off of Artemis; Artemis, "Haven't you all seen a sharp decline in profits recently?" They

said, “Yeah! I’m down 20% this year. I’m down 17%. I’m down 30%.” And then Demetrius says, “You know when all this started right? When that preacher named Paul started showing up and talking about the gospel. Instead of worshipping Artemis, people are worshipping Jesus.” The gospel literally transformed the social fabric of this city and changed the economy.

If you recall, we began the message with this question: **What happens when the gospel comes to a city?** In Ephesus, several things happened. First **Spiritual seekers are baptized.** There were those 12 guys who had been waiting for the Messiah for 25 years, waiting, waiting, waiting. When they finally heard he had come, they placed their faith in him and were baptized.

This is still happening today. We are beginning to support mission work in Japan, where less than 1% of people believe in Jesus. We have some friends who moved there a few years ago and planted a church. This man named **Yoshio** saw a flier for one of their Easter services and came that weekend...and for the next several weekends after that. On one of those weeks the pastor read from John 1:12 “**To all who receive him, to those who believed in his name, Jesus gave the right to become children of God.**” He heard that for the first time in a sermon. He said he began to weep because he said, “I spent my entire life knowing deep down there was a God, but I never knew who he was. Now I not only know him, I know he wants me to be a part of his family.” **So he made the decision to be baptized.** When the gospel comes to a city, spiritual seekers are baptized.

And that’s not just happening overseas. It’s happening right here at this church that we call home. Let me share a few numbers with you. Three weeks ago we saw 14 people baptized in our weekend services. Two weeks ago we saw three people baptized. Last week, three more baptized. Last night at our rooted celebration eleven people were baptized, and today eight people are being baptized. Spiritual seekers are making the decision to trust Jesus and put him first in their life.

A spiritual seeker is anyone who says, like Yoshio, I know there is a God. Look at this universe; it takes way more faith to believe that somewhere, long long ago in a galaxy far far away, water, gas, and dust somehow combined, exploded and if you simply wait 14 billion years later, you end up with life as we know it - with all of its beauty and complexity and meaning. Most people are open to the possibility of God. When they hear the gospel, they discover who that God is, and they place their faith in him. Perhaps we have some spiritual seekers who are with us today. And as you come to better understand the gospel, perhaps you, too, will make the decision to be baptized. When we are baptized, it symbolizes that we are buried with Christ in the likeness of his death, and we are raised to walk in newness of life. We have our sins washed away; we become a new creation; we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What happens when the gospel comes to a city? Spiritual seekers are baptized. We also see that **Religious pretenders are exposed.** In Ephesus, those seven sons of Sceva were going around presenting themselves as people who were deeply spiritual. They said, “We are Jews.” They said, “Our father is a high-ranking priest.” They said, “We know about Jesus because we’ve heard Paul preach.” All of these were used to create a religious persona, but the truth is, they themselves didn’t have a relationship with Jesus. They themselves hadn’t been transformed within. So what happened? They tried to make a show of how much “spiritual power and

knowledge they have” and they end up running naked and bleeding through the city streets. Here’s the truth, we are just as likely to have religious pretenders here with us here today, as they were back then. Religious pretenders come to church. Religious pretenders keep the rules. They know all the answers to Bible questions. They can tell you about the Jesus that they’ve heard someone else preach, but they don’t know Jesus personally. They come to church, they follow the rules, memorize the facts, look like a Christian on the outside, but they don’t know Jesus on the inside. And when the gospel is really taking ground, religious pretenders are exposed. How are they exposed? Here’s how I’ve seen it:

When the gospel is moving people to joy, religious pretenders justify their grouchiness.
When the gospel is moving people to excitement, religious pretenders justify their stoicism.
When the gospel is moving people to community, religious pretenders justify their isolation.
When the gospel is moving people to service, religious pretenders justify their selfishness.
When the gospel is moving people to generosity, religious pretenders justify their greed.

When the gospel is really moving, it changes people from the inside out, makes them new, and it makes them more and more like Jesus. Those who aren’t changed are eventually exposed as religious pretenders.

What happens when the gospel comes to a city? Spiritual seekers are baptized, religious pretenders are exposed and **cultural idols are renounced**. Just like the cultural idols in Ephesus were renounced when the Ephesians heard the gospel, people burning millions of dollars’ worth of books, people no longer buying little statues of gods and goddesses. And it wasn’t just Ephesus. We actually have handwritten letters from the governor of **Bithynia**. You can see where it’s at on a map, here. The governor was **Pliny the Younger**. And in 112 AD he wrote a letter to the Emperor, asking for his help because Christianity was spreading across his territory. He said: “**Many persons of every age, every rank, and also of both sexes are converting. The contagion of (Christianity) has spread not only to the cities but also to the villages and farms. The temples have been almost deserted.**” Do you realize what happened when the gospel came to a city? It wasn’t just a few worshippers here and there, not a small fledgling church...it transformed the landscape, temples once teeming with people becoming ghost towns.

Now that’s from an ancient source. Listen to what a modern, non-Christian sociologist has said about the impact of Christianity on ancient society: **To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity....What Christians brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture.**” ~Rodney Stark

That new culture that Christianity brought was the culture of Christ himself!

- Instead of people leveraging everything to climb up the social or marketplace ladder, like Jesus, they lowered themselves and served others.
- Instead of searching for fulfillment in sexuality and pleasure, they lived lives of chastity and self-control, purity and restraint.

- Instead of chasing after money and possessions, they lived with contentment and joyfully shared what they had with other.

It's not just a new belief system. It's an entirely new way of life!

If the question is, what happens when the gospel comes to a city, here's the answer: **When the gospel comes to a city, God's love changes that city.** And don't you want to see this happen today?! We don't just want to just look back in the pages of the Scriptures and see God's love change a city, we don't just want to hear stories of God's love changing other cities, with our own eyes we want to see **God's love changes our city.** With every fiber of my being I want this to happen?! That's why Keren and I moved to this city. It's not because we love potholes! We want to see God's love change this city. As I was reflecting on what this might look like I remembered the very first sermon I preached at this church almost two years ago. It was Memorial Day weekend, 2017.

This is the day when the eyes of the world focus on our city for the Indianapolis 500. Hundreds of thousands have traveled to see it in person, millions will watch TV. But I am praying and believing for the day when the eyes of world turn to Indianapolis not to see a race, but to see the hand of God. I am praying and believing for the day when God's presence is so powerfully poured out, the lost are so radically saved, lives and marriages and families are so miraculously healed, and the church so exponentially grows, that people would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus is alive and that grace and salvation are available to everyone who calls on his name. Isn't that what you want to be a part of?! Isn't that what you want to happen in our city? Could you imagine what it would look like?

- The foster care system laying off their staff, because every child in their database has been placed in a loving Christian home.
- Strip Clubs closing down because men are either at home with their family or out serving their community.
- Single moms not feeling desperate and alone because there is a network of a dozen families who come alongside them to support them and help raise their kids.
- Every child with special needs being treasured and celebrated and honored.
- Health insurance companies going out of business because Christians took care of one another's needs.

Friends, when the gospel comes to a city, God's love changes a city. Let's continue to bring the gospel to this city, and see what God does! Porch. Communion.