

A NEUTRAL GOSPEL?

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 19:21-41
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My sons and I have been playing a lot of ping-pong lately. The pattern of our games always happens in a similar way. It never starts with a friendly invitation. Rarely does one of us say, “Would you be interested in a friendly match of table tennis?”

It’s way more often that one of us says, “Feel like getting crushed in ping pong?” “Are you ready to be destroyed and annihilated?” or “I hope you’re having a good self-esteem day because you’re going to need some after we play ping pong.”

We love to trash talk. How vividly can you claim an imminent victory and the resulting destruction to your opponent? I tried to look up on the internet some of the best trash talk lines ever to share with you. But it pretty quickly became clear that most of them weren’t Sunday morning sermon appropriate.

Here’s the thing about trash talk, though. It’s only important before the competition. By the time the game is over, whatever was said beforehand no longer matters. All that matters is the score. Before, there were two people trying to win. After, there is one winner and one loser.

Today we’re continuing our series in the book of Acts called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. As we’ve studied this book, we have seen the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ form a new community. We’re now in the part of the book where that message is being carried throughout the world by the apostle Paul. And it is receiving a variety of responses wherever it goes.

In our story this morning, we’re going to see the Gospel come up against the systems of the world. We’re going to see a competition. A match. A contest where there will be a winner and a loser. We’ll hear some trash talk. And we’ll find out what happens when the Gospel comes up against the economic, political, social, and religious structures of this world.

We think of the Gospel as good news. And it is. So why does the Gospel create conflict? What is it about the Gospel that stirs up trash talk? Today we’re going to ask whether we believe a neutral Gospel.

This question is important for us. We live in a culture that loves peace and harmony. We want everyone to get along. We want people to be nice to us. We don’t like conflict. Many of us would much prefer a Gospel that never challenges anyone.

Because of the great diversity of beliefs, cultures, and experiences that we live among, we elevate the values of tolerance and respect. We like to think that everyone can be a winner. We want to find ways to live where no one has to lose and where all ideas and values are equally honored.

These kinds of values are incredibly important. In fact, I believe that it is because of the historical impact of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that our culture even cares about tolerance and respect. But we need to understand the right places and ways to apply them.

It’s naïve to think that we can construct the world where we all agree all the time. Some ideas and values simply can’t coexist with each other. How do we navigate that conflict? What do we expect? How does it play out?

Our story this morning will help us sort through those questions. We’ll see the Gospel create a huge conflict in the city of Ephesus. We’ll watch that conflict escalate. The way that the conflict resolves will challenge us to think about our culture. Ultimately, we’ll see how the Gospel handles the trash talk of the world.

The Setting

The story begins in Ephesus.

Acts 19:21-22:

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.” 22 And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

Last week we heard about the events that happened in Ephesus that form the background for our story this morning. We saw evil do its worst, but God responds with his best. In the last scene, we heard about how “those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.”

The Gospel was taking root in Ephesus. People were responding to the Gospel. As they did, they turned away from those things in their lives that were incompatible with the new Jesus way of life.

Paul saw this happening and realized that this was a good sign. It was time to move on. He wanted to return to Jerusalem so that he could regroup and launch out for his ultimate destination: Rome, the belly of the beast.

He sent two of his companions on ahead of him to prepare the way, but then he stayed back for a moment.

I wonder if he could tell that something was about to happen. I wonder if he sensed that a significant event was on the cusp of occurring. Was something bubbling up in Ephesus? The church was established. Paul had been there for over two years. Did Paul have this sense that something was coming? Could he tell?

I wonder if we have our eyes open to what might be happening in our area. Could something be happening around us? We live in a season of more political division than I can remember in my lifetime. We live in a part of the world that is driving cultural change at a monumental pace. Questions of justice and immigration and sexuality and poverty and race and gender are at an all-time high.

In the midst of that, churches are connecting and collaborating like never before. In a few weeks, I'll attend a meeting with representatives from 23 different regions of the Bay Area who are working toward unity among churches in their local area. We've seen church partnerships form around foster care, homelessness, the housing crisis, and local school support. There is an exciting sense of urgency and partnership in the mission of the Gospel in our area.

If that isn't enough to convince you, we've made our building look a bit nicer here at PBC. If that isn't evidence that God is on the move, I don't know what is.

Could something be happening around here? What is God up to in our day, in this place, at this time?

The Problem

Whether Paul realized it or not, something big was about to happen. The Gospel was about to cause a huge conflict.

Acts 19:23-27:

About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. 24 For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. 25 These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 26 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. 27 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.”

The conflict that arose was a showdown between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the cult of Artemis in the city of Ephesus. We can understate how important Artemis was to the city of Ephesus.

Artemis was one of the most honored goddesses in Greek and Roman culture. She had been worshipped for over one thousand years. She and her twin Apollo are the children of Zeus and his affair with Leto. In the ancient world, her fame and power were second only to Zeus.

Scholars used to think Artemis was a fertility goddess, but the latest evidence suggests that she was considered the goddess of midwifery. Her role was to protect women as they gave birth. Childbirth was the highest manner of death for women in the ancient world. Yet, to preserve the population the average woman had to have at least five children. You can see why Artemis was important.

Legend places the birth of Artemis near the city of Ephesus. Her temple was probably first built in Ephesus before 1000 BC. Newer temples were constructed in the 8th, 7th, and 6th centuries. In the 4th century, it was rebuilt as a spectacular building; four times the size as the Parthenon. It stretched 425 feet by 225 feet with 127 sixty-foot stone columns. That temple counts as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Listen to how the Greek poet Antipater describes the temple,

*I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, "Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand."*¹

Imagine if a city in the United States had a football team that won the Super Bowl every year for a thousand years. They'd have a lot of pride in their team. That's about what people in Ephesus felt toward Artemis. Artemis put Ephesus on the map.

The silversmith Demetrius is probably selling little replica versions of the temple. These would be used by people to worship in their homes; they would be bought by pilgrims travelling to Ephesus, and they would represent Artemis and Ephesus to the world.

Demetrius is worried that with so many people coming to Christ his business will suffer. He calls together a group of his fellow artisans, and he appeals to this fear. He points out that there is a danger that this trade of theirs will stop being respectable. He plays into their patriotism by worrying that the temple and their city by extension will no longer be respected. And he invokes their religious commitments, saying that the goddess that they worship could become "counted as nothing."

Demetrius is right. His life will be dramatically affected if the Gospel flourishes in Ephesus. The Gospel of Jesus is not friendly to maintaining social classes, guaranteeing economic superiority, protecting political dominance, and ensuring cultural privilege. The Gospel doesn't leave a culture the way it finds it.

Who is Demetrius in our culture? Whose lives would have to change if the Gospel really takes root? What are the idols in our world that are threatened by the Gospel? What idols are threatened by the Gospel?

Our world is littered with idols. Luxuriant lifestyles, sexual freedom, wealth as a status symbol, people as disposable, accomplishment as personal value, personal appearance as intrinsic worth, and more.

Let's consider the pornography industry. This is an industry built on portraying sexuality in a way that is entirely inconsistent with a biblical understanding of how God created us to express our sexuality. Not only that, it's built on lies. It's not a real representation of any sex.

And yet the industry makes a ton of money. Each year Hollywood makes about \$10 billion dollars in all its movies. Pornographic films make \$15 billion. Some estimates put the entire industry at \$100 billion per year. That profit is larger than Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association, and the National Football League combined. That is enough money to feed 4.8 billion people every day.

If the Gospel of Jesus Christ swept our country, don't you think the porn industry would be threatened? If people gave up their idol of pornography, the pornography industry would lose a lot of money.

Other idols would be threatened too. Our economy is built on leveraging debt, maximizing disposable income, and protecting wealth. What if people followed Jesus so wholeheartedly that they avoided debt, gave away what they didn't need, and trusted God to provide for the future?

Can you imagine the financial meltdown that would occur if everyone in the U.S. cut up their credit cards?

Demetrius of Ephesus was right to be threatened. The Gospel changes the way people live. Some people have a lot to gain from that. Others have a lot to lose.

The Escalation

The people of Ephesus had gotten an introduction to that issue by Demetrius. They saw what he was worried about. And pretty soon, the issue escalates into a full-scale mob riot.

Acts 19:28-34:

When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” 29 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. 30 But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. 31 And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. 32 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. 33 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. 34 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!”

This riot has gotten out of control. We see so much emotion and frenzy in this paragraph. The crowd is enraged and confused. People rushed the theater, dragging their opponents. Many of them didn’t even know what they were worked up about. They moved the chaos to the theater in Ephesus -- a huge stone amphitheater capable of holding thousands of people. Eventually, it degraded into a mob yelling, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” for two hours without stopping.

Have you ever been in a sports arena when the game is close, and everyone is screaming? Or a concert where the whole crowd is singing along? This kind of energy is an incredible experience. It’s powerful. Moving. Not much in life can touch a group of people and move them to such emotional intensity.

When you get this kind of a reaction, you know that something deep has been touched. Allegiances. Identity. Patriotism. Prosperity. Hope for the future. In Ephesus, the Gospel has touched on some of those basic markers for who we are and how we live our lives.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ reaches into all of those deep places. Jesus has something to say about allegiance and identity and patriotism and prosperity and hope. The Gospel touches our lives and our cultures at some of the very deepest places. Or at least, it ought to.

I sometimes worry that we’ve made the Gospel a nice little theory that we can discuss on Sunday mornings in church. We’re fond of saying that the greatest commandments are to love God and love people. But for a lot of people, that seems to translate into praying and being nice. Is that all it means to follow Jesus? Pray and be nice?

The greatest tragedy of our era is not that people think Christianity isn’t true. The greatest tragedy is that people have concluded that Christianity doesn’t matter. The Gospel isn’t even worth disproving. Believe it or don’t. Either way is fine. It doesn’t matter.

What about you? What about your faith? Maybe you believe in Jesus. Maybe you’re just investigating. Maybe you used to believe, and now you’re not sure anymore.

Ask this of your Jesus. Does he matter? Does he matter to the world or is he just a private God that gives you comfort but doesn’t change anything in the world around you? Does the Jesus you believe in matter? Does your Gospel matter?

We talked earlier about the threat that the Gospel poses to the pornography industry. But the sad truth is that for the most part, the industry of pornography isn’t worried in the least about the Gospel of Jesus. In fact, they probably reason that plenty of their money comes from people who profess faith in Jesus. Whatever gospel people believe, it’s no threat to them.

What about the others systems and structures in our world? Does our Gospel change anything?

Earlier in Acts, there was another riot in the city of Thessalonica. Paul and his companions were accused of preaching a message that was “turning the world upside down.”

In Matthew 20:16, Jesus said, “the last will be first, and the first last.” That sounds great if you are the last. But if you’re currently the first, that doesn’t sound so good. That’s why Demetrius responded the way he did. That’s why the crowd as Ephesus became a mob riot.

I read an article in Wired magazine this week by the title, “Silicon Valley Would Rather Cure Death Than Make Life Worth Living.”² The author charged the companies in our area with being more interested in creating apps and toys for rich people than helping people who need it.

But why would it be any different? The powers of the world always work to protect themselves, to provide for themselves. The titans of Silicon Valley don't want to cure death to make the world a better place. They just don't want to die.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't leave the powers of the world in place. It turns things upside down. Jesus takes the forgotten, the oppressed, and the ignored and ushers them to the head of the table.

When this happens, it creates confusion. Society is used to structure and order. We like to know who is on top and who is in charge. But the Gospel changes all of that. The least of these is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Does your gospel comfort the broken and challenge the powerful? Does your gospel call on you to lay down your privilege and your priority for the sake of the vulnerable? Does your gospel lead you to proclaim Jesus to a world that needs his justice? Does your gospel matter?

The Solution

In response to the riot in Ephesus, the town clerk arrives. He would be the highest-ranking civic position in the city. He steps into the chaos to calm things down.

Acts 19:35-40:

And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? 36 Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. 37 For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. 38 If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. 39 But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. 40 For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion."

This town clerk makes a brilliant argument. He is a smart guy. He points out that everyone in the world knows about Artemis. It can't be denied that she was born near here. Ephesus is her home base. Nothing could change how important and honored and worshipped she is. Everything will be fine.

His argument bears an interesting similarity to the argument of Gamaliel, the Jewish leader in Acts 5. When the Jews were getting worked up about the Gospel, he said, "keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them."

In his mind, "the Way" is an undertaking of man. The town clerk calms everyone down by convincing them that the Gospel of Jesus won't last. He tells them to that if they have problems they can take them to court. Channel their issues into the normal structures of society. Nothing they are doing would threaten the great Artemis.

If this town clerk were around today, he'd drive a Prius with a "COEXIST" bumper sticker on the back.

This is what our culture expects of religion. Believe what you want, but keep it out of the public square. Make sure your religion plays by the rules of society. Worshipping Jesus is fine. But keep it at church. Keep it at home. Keep it in your heart.

But the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not that kind of religion. Jesus doesn't stay at church. Jesus doesn't stay at home. Jesus doesn't stay in our hearts. Jesus goes into the world. Jesus wants to be known by the nations. He wants to be proclaimed in the public square. He challenges the broken systems of the world so that they can be overcome, destroyed, and remade in holiness.

Our call is to worship that Jesus. The Gospel of Jesus does matter. Live it. Live a gospel that matters.

I remember when smoothies first became "a thing." Everyone was so excited for smoothies. It was like no one had ever thought to put some fruit in a blender before.

You'd order your smoothie – whatever flavor you liked. Strawberries Wild. Peach Passion. Whatever. And then you'd add your boost. Some secret additive. Maybe you need some extra probiotics? Or a protein boost? Or vitamins? Or soy or whey or wheatgrass.

I want to confess that I could never tell what that boost did to my smoothie. I never noticed the difference.

This approach is the way some people follow Jesus. They live their lives, work their jobs, go home to their houses, find their spouses, raise their kids, and play soccer on Saturdays. Jesus is like a vita boost that they add to their lives. Jesus makes them happier, improves their marriage, gives them help in parenting, and provides a community.

Demetrius is worried that Jesus will ruin his smoothie. He wants financial stability. He wants his patriotism undisturbed. He wants to preserve his traditional culture. He wants to provide for his family.

All of those are good things. But Jesus does call us to lay those things aside. We live in dependence on God, not our 401k plans. We count ourselves as citizens of the kingdom of God above any earthly allegiance. We pray for Jesus to transform culture, not preserve it. And Jesus challenges our notion of family, claiming that his people are our brothers and sisters.

This week I had lunch with a pastor in San Francisco who is part of an intentional Christian community. It's a group of 30-40 people who live together in a shared property. They share much of their financial resources. They make decisions together. They worship together. It's probably the closest model to a first-century church that I've encountered.

We may not be called to live in that kind of an intentional community. But we are called to see our economics, our relationships, our worship, and our families transformed by a gospel that turns the world upside down. What does that look like for you?

Maybe it's a career change. Maybe it's a change in the way you spend your money or give your money. Maybe it's volunteering here church or locally in your community. Maybe it's immersing yourself in the Scriptures to find out how you're being called. Ask God to lead you. Live a gospel that matters.

The Resolution

The town clerk tries to settle everyone down by claiming that Jesus isn't a threat.

Listen to how the situation resolves.

Acts 19:41:

And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

It worked. The riot was relieved. Everyone went home. Life went on as normal. And the town clerk was right in a sense. The worship of Artemis continued to be a thriving business. In fact, one hundred years later it was still going strong. It was so successful that a Roman edict from 162 AD officially extends the festival of Artemis from a few holy days to an entire month.

Sometimes it seems like the Gospel doesn't matter. Sometimes we look around at our faith, and we don't see it challenging the way of the world. Was the town clerk right along? We want to think that the Gospel does change everything. But does it?

Maybe the Gospel doesn't matter. Maybe it is just about our lives. Maybe it doesn't ripple out. Maybe the Gospel is neutral.

Except that in 268 AD, the temple of Artemis was destroyed. This time it wasn't rebuilt. This time no one cared. For a thousand years, the great goddess Artemis or Ephesus lay under the dirt. When it was finally uncovered, people dusted it off and put it behind panes of glass. Not as an object of worship. As an object of curiosity, housed in a museum for people to marvel at the things that people of old used to care about.

We need to look at our faith and ask ourselves whether we've relegated it to a private lifestyle that doesn't affect the world around us. But we cannot underestimate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. With or without us, God will be at work. With or without us, God is demonstrating his power and preeminence. With or without us, the Gospel of Jesus Christ will change the world.

Look around. No one worships Artemis anymore. Demetrius was right. Making silver shrines of her temple has fallen out of respect. The temple of the goddess has been counted as nothing. And Artemis herself has indeed been deposed from her magnificence. Even she, whom all Asia and the whole world worshipped.

But Jesus Christ is alive and well. The message of the Gospel continues to reverberate around the world. All over this planet, in every language and nation, people are gathered this morning to acknowledge their dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The irony for someone like Demetrius is that while the Gospel may seem to threaten his way of life, in the end, it would have opened up a whole new kind of life for him to experience. All that he knows may have to go away, but what replaces it will be so much better. Instead of guilt, he'll find forgiveness. Instead of worry, he'll find peace. Instead of fighting for respect as an artisan, he'll understand his worth as a child of the living God.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not neutral. It is a threat to the powers of the world. The Gospel of Jesus may seem to turn the world upside down. But what it leaves is a world turned right-side-up. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news indeed.

Endnotes

¹ Antipater of Sidon. *Greek Anthology* (IX.58).

² Dreyfuss, Emily. "Silicon Valley Would Rather Cure Death Than Make Life Worth Living." *Wired*. 23 Mar 2017. (<https://www.wired.com/2017/03/silicon-valley-rather-cure-death-make-life-worth-living/>). Accessed 23 Mar 2017.