

Acts 19 (21-41) – The Solution to Your Problem

Do you have some pattern of sin, sorrow, and spiritual sickness in your life? We all do, at some point, in some way. But if you really want to deal with it you have to find the root cause, and you have to know how to cut that root out. Let me state it plainly right at the start. The root of your problem is idolatry, and the solution to your problem is the gospel. But what does that really mean, and how do you walk that out? That is what we are going to deal with in this message.

When you keep failing to grow in some area, when you keep being resistant and rebellious as a pattern, it is because something other than Jesus is at the center of your life. You have some idol that is promising you a better path, engaging you in your deep emotions, you feel the need to protect it, and it demands that you feed it. When God challenges your idols, you might have the same reactions that those in this passage had. You don't like it, it causes you to fear, and you get angry and perhaps act violently in defending your precious poison.

The city of Ephesus was a wealthy port region, filled with all different sorts of people, and it was home to the world's largest library. It also had the world's largest temple, to Artemis (or Diana), whose statute was carved out of a meteorite. The temple was one of the seven manmade wonders of the world. The people believed that the worship of Artemis would protect the city and that it was the reason why they were so prosperous. Their idolatry affected every aspect of their lives. They were completely enmeshed in its evil power.

This riot included two hours of the same outcry. That doesn't even happen in a concert or a sporting event. This must have been a matter of life and death for these people. And it was, and it is, even today. People think of idolatry as an ancient problem for backwards people who bowed down to statues, but you aren't beyond idolatry. You simply dress it up in different clothes. When it comes to idolatry, you replace God with objects, persons, ideals, and dreams. Our passage gives you 5 insights into the reality of idolatry for you today: the outline of these points and some of the material comes from pastor's J.D. Greear and Tim Keller.

1. An idol is anything that promises you a life of security and joy apart from God. The Ephesians believed that Artemis was their source of protection and prosperity. With her, they were guaranteed security and joy. This false hope is precisely what makes an idol an idol. Idols are not usually bad things, but *good* things that have become *ultimate* things – things you believe guarantee you joy and security. Paul Tripp – “The desire for even a good thing becomes a bad thing when that desire becomes a ruling thing.”

What is that in your life? About what do you think, “As long as I have *this*, I'll have happy”? What do you so desperately need that you can't imagine a fulfilled life without it? It is authority, influence, success, beauty, money, romance, marriage, a degree, a title, fame, respect, having children, having “good” children, or “happy” children?

What makes these idols so dangerous is that they are nearly always good things. I have seen the good of desiring marriage become a false god. I've seen the good of wanting to provide become the idol of always needing to achieve one more financial benchmark. The problem isn't the money or the marriage. The problem comes when you trust in those things to ultimately satisfy.

If you lose a good thing from your life, you are sad, you grieve; if you lose an ultimate thing, a god thing, an idol, you are devastated. What if you never get that dream job, that dream marriage, those dream kids? What if you lose your health, or your wealth? What if you never get noticed, never get any respect, and never accomplish some great thing? What if you have to suffer through this life while others seem to sail on through? What if you are the victim of injustice that is never made right? What is it that you think will give you security and joy, and that without them you won't have security and joy, even if you have God? That's an idol.

2. Idols engage the deepest emotions in your heart. When idols are challenged, people get angry, and they may get violent. That's what happens in Acts 19. And it happens when something you love is threatened, because many of your deepest emotions are connected to idols.

What is that in your life? About what do you think, "If I ever lost *this*, I'd never survive"? What possible loss makes you not only frightened, but *despairing*? What do you worry about not getting enough of, so much that you fear of losing it all the time? Perhaps your deepest emotions are connected to recognition, reputation, and success. Perhaps you are constantly seeking the affirmation and praises of others. People are looking to an idol for validation. Perhaps your deepest desire is to be respected, or desired. Those idols can lead you into doubt and despair over and over, no matter how well you do, and no matter how many people notice you or want you.

Who are you unable to forgive? When you can't forgive someone, it's because what they did caused a deep resentment that you just can't let go. You feel the hurt down to your very core. It might be because they attacked, or threatened, your idol.

The irony here is that *idolizing something ultimately keeps you from being able to enjoy it at all*. You fret so much that you can never rest. For instance, many wealthy people are paranoid about their money. Many beautiful people have eating disorders. You see it in codependent relationships; people can go from being a loving, sweet person into a dominating, obsessive, controlling person. Gaining more of an idol only heightens that sense of fear, because nothing other than God can sustain the weight of your soul. You can make an idol of your imagination about your own self and who you think you are or need to be, because you fear the truth about yourself. You fear the loss of your feeling of control. You may even get violent towards yourself.

3. Idols need to be protected. Demetrius the craftsman was making a fortune on Artemis trinkets and nick-knacks. He wasn't about to stand by while Paul undermined his entire financial enterprise with his powerful preaching of "Gods made with hands are not really gods". So he gathered up a group to force Paul out of town. Artemis was the supposed protector of Ephesus. Yet when Demetrius' cash flow was at risk he immediately jumped up to defend her. That's the absurdity of idolatry: what is supposed to protect you becomes something you fiercely protect. Even today, people will protect their need for security even when their cult is shown to be false.

What is that in your life? What do you feel obsessive about protecting in your life? When something you cherish is threatened how do you respond? Your response is proportionate to its influence in your life. When your will comes up against God's will, how do you respond? What is it that sends you into "holy crusade" mode when it is attacked? What will you make excuses for, and go to war for? Your false gods *always* need to be protected.

4. Idols demand sacrifices to keep them happy. The whole system in Ephesus was built on appeasing Artemis and keeping her happy. That was no accident: **idols will always make you sacrifice for them.** If business is your idol, you'll sacrifice your integrity to climb the ladder of success. If acceptance is your idol, you'll sacrifice your honesty and lie to get affirmation. If affection and companionship are an idol, you will compromise with God's will because you just can't stand the idea of being alone. If romance is your idol, someone besides your spouse can set your heart aflame, and you may walk out when the "sparks die out" in your marriage. If money is your idol, you'll find excuses not to give to the things of God. If comfort is your idol, it will lead you to sacrifice all sorts of godly things just to stay in your comfort zone. If fun is your idol, you will sacrifice obedience to God on the altar of entertainment.

An idol is like a fire. It never says, "That's enough." Instead, it just keeps asking for more. The altar of idolatry is terrifyingly insatiable: *the more you sacrifice for an idol, the more it will demand.* The idol has to be fed, and the more it is fed, the more it wants. For example, even a constant supply of the fuel of sex can never extinguish the fire of lust.

What is that in your life? What part of yourself have you sacrificed on the altar of an idol? Where do you feel that "pull" to keep cutting corners or making excuses? Don't fool yourself into thinking that *this* sacrifice will be the last one.

5. The gospel overcomes your idolatry. The idol of money says to you, "If you don't do enough to obtain *me*, I'll make you miserable." The idols of acceptance, recognition, and success say, "I'm your identity, you have make sure I'm *fed*, or I'll starve you into despair." The idol of control says, "You're not *safe* without *me*." The idol of family says, "If you lose *me*, life won't be worth living." The idol of sex says, "I'm the most fulfilling thing there is, you will *never* be satisfied without *me*". The idol of comfort says, again and again, "Sacrifice your honesty, your integrity, your closest relationships, *for me*."

Idols are harsh taskmasters. If you fail them, they make you pay. But in the gospel Jesus says to you, "*You did fail me. But instead of destroying you, I'll let myself be destroyed for you. Instead of demanding a sacrifice, I will become a sacrifice for you.*" Unlike idols, in Jesus you find the only God that can ultimately satisfy you, and even when you fail him, he will forgive you. Jesus can be your ultimate source of significance, sufficiency, and security.

Let the gospel change how you think. You are transformed into the image of Christ by renewing your mind, which will involve the removing of your idols, and this is done by focusing on the gospel of Christ. For some, their biggest problem is their idolatrous picture of Jesus Christ, who is just a projection of their feelings, instead of the revelation of the Scriptures, and the Jesus who asserts his Lordship over all of life. They focus on only the parts of Jesus they want, instead of the whole picture, and so they don't mature as a Christian.

So what do you do now? Submit to God. Confess that you have held onto something as an idol, admit that something else has been at the center, that something else has been deeper than the gospel, that you haven't let the love of God in Christ be your all in all. Ask God to forgive you, and rejoice in the hope of the gospel of Christ. The gospel, rightly understood, and continually applied, is what roots out your idols. That is the solution to all of your problems.