

Text: Acts 19:21-41

Theme: Unbelievers fear the gospel for a variety of reasons

My purpose for this message: To help Christians understand unbelievers better so their evangelism is better.

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[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

The Gospel's Threat to Unbelievers

Is Christianity dangerous? Is the gospel a threat to unbelievers? If not, why are they afraid of “the Way” as Luke likes to call Christianity?

Buried beneath Southeast Asia's humid jungles is Laos, a country I have come to love. As one of the world's 5 remaining communist nations, this country's leaders despise the 60-80,000 Laotian Christians. Although for propaganda purposes they allow 3 churches to worship publicly in the capital city of Vientienne; the rest are underground.

Usually communism doesn't mix well with *any* religion, but officials here urge their citizens to be Buddhists since that's a “homegrown religion.” Since Christianity is a “foreign religion” identified with the west, in the late nineties it was publicly declared to be “state enemy #1” and the government set out to eradicate it by 2000. Instead, the number of Christians may have doubled just since 1997. Today, officials scour the villages and towns, pressuring Christians to sign an official document renouncing Jesus Christ. Those who don't risk being expelled from their villages, imprisoned, or forced to host government officials who move in with the family, badger them, and eat their meager supplies of food until they finally capitulate.

Christians are exasperated. “The government does not understand that because of the teachings of the Bible, we are the *best* citizens they could hope to have, the most reliable the most honest.”

Is Christianity a threat; is the gospel a threat? Some of your neighbors think so. Increasingly believers are being compared to the Taliban, to militant islamists. People are afraid we're going to institute a theocracy. Nativity scenes are ruled illegal and so is picture little Johnny drew for school of pilgrims praying.

The gospel is viewed as threatening, and always has been. Jewish leaders feared the growing number of Jesus' followers would cost them their power, maybe even their country. The rich young ruler feared losing his wealth for the gospel.

READ Acts 19:21-41. PRAY.

The Gospel's Threat to Unbelievers.

Story

Thus begins the final section of Acts. Although the remaining chapters will take another 6 years, this marks the beginning of the end for Paul. Looking east from Ephesus he told his friends in Rome: *...now there is no more place for me to work in these regions...* (Rom.15:23); the eastern half of the empire had been thoroughly evangelized. He prepares to turn his efforts to the west, using Rome as a home base. But first, it's off to Jerusalem where the Spirit warned him he'd run into trouble.

Meanwhile, before he left, trouble was brewing in Ephesus, worship center for the goddess Artemis. Her temple was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. It had taken 120 years to build. It soared 6 stories into the air, its footprint exceeding the size of a football field. Inside was a meteorite which—since it had fallen from the sky—people assumed was divine. The people took its odd shape to be that of a many-breasted

woman. Many Asians worshipped her as the mother goddess. There were at least 33 other shrines to Artemis around the Roman empire but this was the main one.

Artemis was not just a religious figure, but a commercial one. Because she was so revered, her temple became a bank: the finest, the safest in all of Asia. Also, religious pilgrims came to visit the shrine, bolstering the towns economy: the inns were full, the market foods sold briskly, and of course, religious souvenirs: statues of the goddess.

Once a mighty center of trade, Ephesus' harbor was filling up with silt from the Cayster River, so more and more the economy *depended* on religious pilgrims. Imagine what would happen to Lancaster County's economy if tourism were cut in half. That was the specter Demetrius was fearing. Because of the wide distribution of the gospel, the pilgrim traffic was off, the local markets were not as busy.

No wonder local craftsmen went ballistic. "Paul's jeopardizing our industry." Craftsmen and bystanders alike quickly turned into an unruly mob, sweeping down the grand pillar-lined Arkadiane Way in noisy protest. Paul wasn't within reach so along the way they snatched two of Paul's friends. At the end of the boulevard they flowed into a huge hillside amphitheater where for 2 hours they shouted feverishly, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians."

Typical mob mentality: some in the crowd had no clue what was going on, they had just been swept along (v.32). Eventually the city clerk arrived, settled everyone down, dismissing them with a warning about the consequence of civil unrest.

Interesting contrast between one pagan and another. Demetrius felt threatened by the gospel, the clerk didn't. Nor apparently, did some high-ranking government officials who were also pagans. READ vv.30-31.

When we talk to unbelievers about Christ, we should not be surprised if they keep us at arm's length. They're scared. What you believe, what you live, what lives in you, what you stand for, threatens them.

I'm going to mention 4 possible fears unbelievers have about the gospel today; things they perceive as threats. It's important we understand these perceptions for two reasons:

- ❑ To prepare us for an unbeliever's shell, her wariness. Do not be discouraged thinking this means, "Well, I'll never get through to them." The suspicion is normal.
- ❑ To prepare us to relieve their *unwarranted* fears, and stand fast on reinforcing *warranted* fears .

If you're *not* a Christian, this might ring true for you. Once you realize you're normal, maybe you too will risk investigating to find out if your fears are legit—or if you've just been snowed by Satan.

1. A Threat to My Religion

Certainly followers of other religions view Christianity—especially with its conviction that the gospel must be spread—as a threat to their Buddhism, their Judaism, their Islam. (Some religions like Hinduism simply make Jesus one more of their gods along with Vishnu, Siva, and Ganesha.) But most people who are being exposed to the gospel soon grasp that it leaves no room for competing religions: "Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus] for there is no other name [but Jesus] under heaven given to men

by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12). Jesus claimed NO one comes to the Father *except* through Him (Jn.14:6).

Irreligious people fear the religious impact of Christianity too. After all, in most cases irreligious people have spent *years* sterilizing their lives—and those of family members—of religion, and they don't want their efforts to be in vain. And what probably lurks beneath the surface most often, is their attachment to personal freedom: they don't want to risk being told what to do or what not to do.

What does Demetrius claim is the gospel's threat? "Discredit Artemis' temple, discredit her name (27b). But the *clerk* says, "These men have not robbed temples or blasphemed our goddess (35). What's his *real* fear? His pocketbook. Concern for religion is all smoke and mirrors to hide his greed. READ vv.24, 27a. "If worship suffers, so does our income."

2. A Threat to My Income

American unbelievers wouldn't worry about market loss for the sale of idols, but they have similar fears that the gospel *does* pose a threat to income. Take the dilemma—for instance—of a new Christian who's a salesman. He's been padding his expense account. His travel and meal expenses in a year are say, \$8,000. Yet the account he submits and gets reimbursed for, is \$11,000.

What of the physician who encounters Christ; his specialty is performing abortions? The pay's better, the risk of lawsuits less than general practice. There are three kids in college and a mortgage that *needs* that extra money.

What about the family where the mother who's a new Christian believes she needs to quit work to stay home with her preschoolers? The family budget requires *two* incomes. The call of the gospel *does* pose genuine threats to wealth.

On the other hand, it's long been suspected that the gospel demands poverty. Mother Theresa had nothing; Jesus had nothing; the apostles had nothing. Jesus required a rich young ruler to dispose of his wealth so he could inherit eternal life. The Bible says you can't serve God and money too. Unbelievers fear one threat of the gospel is that they must live like paupers to be saved.

And most of all, what about tithing? American unbelievers are intensely suspicious that promoting the gospel is the church's dirty little money-making racket designed to fleece the gullible.

In this area, there are aspects of the fears that are legitimate, but others aren't.

3. A Threat to My Personal Life

"Isn't it true that the gospel affects you're whole life?" Unbelievers look at their lives and conclude, "I like mine just the way it is. I don't really *want* different friends, I like the ones I have. I like my lifestyle. I'm not into giving up what I do for leisure and entertainment and I'm certainly not going to give up my Sunday mornings. *And*, I prefer the seductive fashions I wear, thank you very much."

The unbeliever is correct; this is a legitimate threat. The Bible isn't shy about recommending the kind of people we should hang out with. And it talks about all matter of lifestyle issues from employment to dating, to sharing, to purity, to good citizenship. And it even says some things about how we dress.

What unbelievers *don't* understand is that at the moment of surrender to Christ, God moves into a life and begins to change how we *view* such things.

4. A Threat to My Politics:

We're rediscovering something in this election that I worried was long lost: passion. In some case passion *for* a candidate, in other cases, passion *against* one. I think that's a good thing. I prefer passion—even aimed the *wrong* direction—to apathy.

But passions are running especially high these days on faith issues. Seems like a lot of people are furious that leaders like Gib Armstrong, Joe Pitts, and George Bush name Christ without apology. Such folks want God and His purposes censored in the public square. Even if He does exist, the public should act as if He doesn't exist because this is a pluralistic society.

But the gospel leads elsewhere. At conversion, all political views, opinions, and convictions are peeled back for Jesus to scrutinize. Those that conform to His purposes, can remain; those that don't, must be discarded or changed. To say politics is in some special category that faith does not touch is to compartmentalize. Jesus said not to withhold any part of our being from loving God, and so there can be no aspect of life—including our political convictions—that is exempt from our compliance with God's purposes.

Concl:

2 years ago after the community began falling on its face in prayer, God showed up in the coal mining community of Harlan County, KY. Many people who believed the gospel was a threat, discovered it was. Not all of them were outside the church. Mike Braithwaite was one who was though, and his story made the national news.

Mike owned a small pornography store called "Love World" along highway 63. The Concerned Citizens of Putney members had mobilized against it, filed lawsuits, but nothing budged Mike.

There were people in that town praying for Mike though. And at a prayer meeting with the Closplint Church of God one Wednesday night, he surrendered to Christ and was baptized the following Sunday.

This is where it got dangerous. Mike's living was in direct conflict with the gospel which exhorts us to follow Christ. What do you do if your livelihood depends on disobedience? You obey!

Mike got some pastors together at this old shop, brought out all his inventory—worth about \$10,000, and lit a match after pouring 10 gallons of diesel fuel on the stuff. God has wondrously provided and Love World is now Mike's Place, a Christian bookstore. But when Mike torched the sex toys, the videos, the books, the clothing, he didn't know that. Because the threat of the gospel, no longer mattered. Only its hope and its joy.