

C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*:
“There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight”

Many go through life living within a bubble of naturalism, giving the supernatural realm in general, and supernatural enemies in particular, little thought. Since the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, when the scientific method with its emphasis on reason and experimentation took hold, the western world has been skeptical about the spiritual realm.

As Clinton Arnold in his book Powers of Darkness (p.170) observes:
The period brought about a deep-seated and lasting change in the way we perceive reality in the West. The new supremacy of a materialistic and rationalistic world view now called into question the reality of the miraculous and supernatural, even that which was recorded in Scripture. The references to demons and angels now became regarded as ‘myth,’ perhaps important for conveying theological truth but devoid of any historical substance. We continue to live in the shadow of the Enlightenment. This is why in educational institutions all throughout the West the idea of the actual existence of evil spirits is disavowed.

Arnold later notes the danger of such conclusions (p.177f):
On the issue of the actual existence of evil spirits, science is unable to decide the question Just as it is beyond the scope of science to adjudicate on matters of morality, so it is also beyond the parameters of science to make a decision on the question of the real existence of the devil and evil spirits.... If spirits do not have a tangible physical existence, modern science does not have the tools for verifying or denying their real existence. This makes the question of their existence depend not on scientific observation, but upon revelation, world view, and human experience.

It’s common in places like North America and Europe to ignore the spiritual realm, but not so in the rest of the world. Many others recognize,

like the Apostle Paul, that we are engaged in warfare with supernatural forces. And Paul was never more aware of that fact than when he was in the city of Ephesus.

That’s why when he later wrote the letter to the believers in Ephesus (the letter we have in the New Testament), he stated:

Read Ephesians 6:10-12

*** ¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil [tou/ diabo,lou, slanderer]. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.**

Then Paul devotes the next six verses to God’s provision for us to experience victory over these enemies. That provision includes what Paul calls the armor of God.

Why did Paul include this extended section devoted to spiritual warfare in *this* letter – in *this* letter to the believers in Ephesus? It’s because those living in Ephesus were more attuned than others to the evil spiritual forces around them. And sadly, the actual worship of these evil spiritual forces was prevalent in Ephesus.

Paul knew this because he’d been in Ephesus – longer than in any other city he visited during his missionary journeys. And we’ve been watching his ministry in Ephesus through the eyes of Luke in the book of Acts. Let’s return to where we left off last week.

[Turn to Acts 19]

Ephesus became Paul’s home for almost 3 years. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind only Rome and Alexandria, with a population over 250,000. It was the cultural and commercial center of Asia. It was also the center of occult activity, notorious for magic, sorcery, and other demonic activities. It’s believed that more than 40 god and goddesses were worshiped there. Chief among them, the goddess Artemis, whose temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. We’ll say more about her in 3 weeks, when we conclude Paul’s ministry in Ephesus.

In light of the Ephesians fascination with spiritual forces of darkness, it’s not surprising

that we find God demonstrating His power in ways that they could appreciate. We'll see God authenticating Paul and the gospel in dramatic ways to confirm that His power is superior to the forces they use in their magic and sorcery.

After telling us about Paul's ministry to a dozen disciples of John the Baptist, as well as Paul's 3 month ministry in the synagogue, Luke tells us that Paul established his own school for making disciples. The he summarized the impact of the gospel in this way:

Read v.10

***¹⁰ This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.**

That's where we stopped last week. Luke now goes on to tell us about incredible things that accompanied Paul's ministry in Ephesus during that time when he was making disciples who were impacting all of Asia:

Read vs.11,12

***¹¹ God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,¹² so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.**

God was not *just* performing miracles by Paul's hands, * but **extraordinary** miracles! He wants us to know God was working in especially dramatic fashion – in ways the supernaturally infatuated Ephesians could not miss.

The dramatic “fashion” in which God worked included * through **handkerchiefs** and **aprons** (“fashion”... **handkerchiefs** and **aprons**...get that?... ☺). Anyway...in a city known to place great stock in magical power communicated through lucky charms and magical objects, God was demonstrating *His* power through objects associated with Paul – objects Paul used in his trade.

In the course of working with leather and making tents, Paul used **handkerchiefs** on his head and **aprons** around his waist to dry his sweat and clean his hands. These items were taken by people and applied to those who were sick. Contact with these articles from Paul resulted in miraculous healings and exorcisms, as v.11 states: ***and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.**

It reminds me of the time a woman was healed by touching the hem of Jesus' garment:

Read Luke 8:43,44

⁴³ And a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and could not be healed by anyone,⁴⁴ came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His cloak, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.

God was working amazingly, and at the same time affirming Paul's authority. The words Paul wrote to the Corinthians were applicable to the Ephesians as well:

Read II Corinthians 12:12

***¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.**

Jesus was working through the Apostle Paul in ways He was at work during His own earthly ministry – and as He was earlier in the Book of Acts through others Apostles – healing people and casting out demons.

God at work through Paul did not go unnoticed:

Read vs.13,14

***¹³ But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches."¹⁴ Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.**

Luke tells us about **seven sons of** a man named **Sceva**, who's identified as a **Jewish chief priest**. There's no historical record of a chief priest by that name before 70 AD. It's *possible* that there was such a **Sceva** who was a member of a high priestly family, or *not impossible* that these men, far from Jerusalem, were just making this up to enhance their reputations. They wouldn't be the first (nor the last) to claim things about themselves that weren't exactly true.

By identifying themselves as relatives of an esteemed priest, they'd be suggesting that they had access to the secret name of God, which only priests could utter. And in Ephesus, using secret names of deities went a long way in unleashing their powers. Such names were used in rituals, incantations, and casting spells.

The seven Jewish exorcists were trying to capitalize on Paul's power by adding to their repertoire Paul's “formula” for casting out

demons. After all, if it worked for him, why wouldn't it work for them?! So Luke tells us they *** went from place to place, attempting to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches."**

How did that work out for them?

Read vs.15,16

***¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize [γινώσκω] Jesus, and I know about [ἐπίσταμαι] Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.**

The ones who thought they were the "casters out" wound up being the "cast out"! Why? Note the words of the evil spirit within the man (v.15b): *** "I recognize [γινώσκω] Jesus, and I know about [ἐπίσταμαι] Paul, but who are you?"**

Two different words are used for the *knowledge* this demon has of Jesus and Paul. Some think it's a stylistic variation, others to distinguish between this demon's knowledge of Jesus and of Paul. If the latter, it's probably an expression of greater grudging respect for Jesus. The ESV has "**Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?**", and the NIV has "**Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?**".

In essence the evil spirit is saying, "**Now those two ring a bell – but exactly who are you guys?**" The evil spirit recognizes the ultimate authority of Jesus, *and* the delegated authority of Paul, *but* even after checking on his smart phone, their names do *not* appear on the list of those having delegated authority from Jesus.

Paul *knew* the Jesus whose name he used, while these seven *knew not* the One whose name they used. *The name of Jesus* bandied about like a lucky charm means nothing, but *Jesus Himself* working through His servant means everything.

The unrecognized exorcists who thought *they* now had the power, were rendered *powerless*:

Read v.16

***¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.**

In recording this incident, what's Luke stressing? It's all about *whom* you know. Supernatural forces are very powerful – but *not* more powerful than Jesus. Knowing Jesus makes all the difference in *this* world (not to mention *the next*). Naming the name of Jesus means nothing apart from abiding in Jesus.

What did this incident (and no doubt others of similar nature) have on those in Ephesus?

Read v.17

***¹⁷ This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.**

This speaks of the general, widespread impact of what God was miraculously doing through Paul. Even those who didn't turn to Jesus in genuine repentance and faith, were overcome with **fear** for the Lord Jesus – just as those in Jerusalem did in the early days after Pentecost.

Ben Witherington III identifies the importance of this passage in Luke's account (p.576):

"The narrative we find in these verses is full of local color and reflects a clear knowledge that Ephesus was indeed the magic capital of Asia Minor. If Christianity could triumph there, its God would clearly be seen to be great."

Luke is showing us that all other supernatural forces in Ephesus take a back seat to Jesus. He's showing us that ultimate authority resides with Jesus.

While the entire city of Ephesus as a whole was being impacted in a general way, it seems many of the believers in Ephesus were being impacted in a specific way:

Read vs.18,19

***¹⁸ Many also of those who had believed [πεπιστευκότων perf. act. ptc. πιστεύω] kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. ¹⁹ And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.**

It appears that many of those in Ephesus who had already come to faith in Christ, had failed to make a clean break with involvement in the occult. They were living in syncretistic culture – a culture where it was common to blend aspects of different religions together. It's like that one

soup your cousin makes, whereby she tosses everything in the back of her fridge into a pot, mixes it together, heats it up, and serves it to her unsuspecting family and/or guests – hoping that no one dies. They were doing the same with gods and goddess, with Jesus and evil spirits – and many were dying.

The problem with syncretism is that *truth* often gets obscured by *error* – and if you aren't able to spot *the error*, it makes you wonder if you really know *the truth*. And it seems that this was a problem for many believers in Ephesus. But the spirit of God began to work powerfully through the ongoing miraculous ministry and teaching of Paul. It seems those believers who had one foot in the church and one in their past lives, were touched by the Holy Spirit who brought both discernment and conviction into their lives.

While they were going to church, they were still engaged in their occult practices. One moment they were listening to Paul preach truth, the next they were reading from their books of magic spells. One moment they were humbly seeking to submit to the God's power, the next they were trying to magically manipulate evil spirits for their own benefit.

But they were now confronted with their hypocrisy. In a moving of God's Spirit, they willingly **kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices**. And they give evidence of their sincerity by breaking with their past – and doing so publicly by **burning** their books that contained magic spells and lists of secret names of evil spirits that they used to manipulate the spirit world. They probably also brought with them lucky charms and idols that were also part of occult practices.

Evidence of this being a work of the Holy Spirit is gleaned from the value of that which was burned. The total value is estimated to have been **fifty thousand pieces of silver**. Each piece of silver was likely equivalent to a denarius or a drachma, making it the equivalent of one day's wage for a day laborer. The total then would be something like **fifty thousand** days of pay.

It's hard to be certain how that translates to in today's value, but it might well be thought of in today's terms of being worth hundreds of thousands – even millions – of dollars!

We are talking about *a serious* commitment. And the fact that they didn't sell it, but destroyed it, shows they recognized the danger of that from which they were breaking. During His earthly ministry, Jesus called upon people to count the cost of following Him. These believers in Ephesus finally did that – and they were willing to pay the price.

The Luke adds:

Read v.20

*** ²⁰ So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.**

What we just read in vs.11-19 among both the believers and unbelievers is both the reason *and* the fruit of **the word of the Lord...growing mightily and prevailing**. As **the word of the Lord** spread it impacted lives dramatically – and as people were changed, it caused the word of God to continue to grow mightily. And when we return to Acts in 3 weeks, we'll see just how dramatic and significant an impact the gospel had on the society as a whole.

But we can't conclude this morning without considering what the Lord desires *of us* – what this passage says *to us*. I wonder if we are tempted to be like many of believers in Ephesus, living with one foot in the Church, and the other firmly planted in the ways of our past.

Unfortunately, the moment we are born again does not result in our complete transformation. It does however transfer us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's Son. And it does implant within us the Holy Spirit who assures us of the promise of complete transformation in the future, and the power for ongoing growth in the present.

God wants our experience in life to be more like our position in Christ. He wants us to be less like the people we were when we were living in rebellion against Him, to be more like the one to we are now following.

In light of what we read this morning, this is a good time to ask ourselves how we are doing in our walk with Jesus. I wonder if there is anything that is keeping us from growing in our commitment to Jesus? I wonder if we are in any way like the believers in Ephesus who failed to make that clean break with the past – with the things that were antithetical to who they were in Christ?

Maybe you're thinking, "***Phew, I'm not involved in the occult or magic or sorcery. No guilt here!***" Great, but that doesn't necessarily mean you are not living with one foot firmly planted in this world – with a dangerous pull to the harmful things in your past.

Are you increasingly moving away from those things in your past that are dangerous – from those old habits, old values, old patterns of thinking, old ways of responding to people and situations, and dangerous sins? Are you allowing God's grace to not just provide you with the comfort of forgiveness, but with the power of change?

When you come to Jesus, He doesn't want part of us – He wants all of us. It's a fallacy to think that if we give God 1 day a week and 5 minutes a day in prayer, that that's OK and God should be happy with that. If Jesus didn't lay claim to our lives, that would be fine. But He owns us completely and desires our total allegiance.

In Ephesus, many believers confessed their sin and tossed into the fire the things that were antithetical to their faith and causing a limp in their walk with Christ. Is there anything we need to confess and repent of? Is there anything we need to part ways with? Is there anything we need to toss in the fire? Is there anything in us hindering what God wants to do not only *in* our lives, but *through* our lives?

God's not after our worst interests, but our best. He's interested in leading us from darkness into light, from shame into glory, from guilt to forgiveness, from sorrow to joy, from a wasted life to a fruitful life.

If we are followers of Christ, we have a great God, a great Savior, and the awesome power of the Holy Spirit within us. May we, by God's grace, give evidence of that to others that they too might come to know Him, love Him, and walk with Him.