

Text: Acts 19

Today our lesson tells us to ask ourselves how we might serve God better, “maximizing” the opportunities He gives to us for service. My first question is: in what ways are we commanded to serve Him?

By sharing the faith with others. 19Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:19-20)

By giving to His work. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

By helping those in need. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27; also discusses avoiding worldliness), 15 If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. (James 2:15-17)

By meeting with other believers for fellowship and encouragement. 24and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

By living every aspect of our lives for His glory, bringing them under His sovereignty. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17) 23Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men. (Colossians 3:23)

I'm sure you can think of other things that we are to do, though the last one of these is a sort of “catch-all.” The question is, how do we serve Him in these and other areas most effectively? Our passages for today concern primarily the communication of the Gospel itself:

1It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." 3And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism" 4Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." 5When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:1-5)

Paul encountered here a group of people whose understanding of the Gospel was incomplete. To be honest, Apollos might have been at fault for this:

24Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. 25This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; 26and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. (Acts 18:24-26)

Apollos became one of the leading early preachers of the Christian faith, but when he first began preaching his understanding of the Gospel was not complete. Although Priscilla and Aquila corrected him, it appears that some of those at Ephesus that had heard the earlier teaching of John (the Baptist)—whether from Apollos or someone else—had not had the fulfilled Gospel of Jesus Christ presented to them. Paul preached Jesus to them, and God saved them as a result.

These Ephesians understood the Truth in part, but they were still missing the faith which brings eternal life. Clearly, our accuracy and completeness of presenting the Gospel can mean the difference life and death, Heaven and Hell. The story presented on pages 104-105 of the book relates a similar problem of the people in the lesson writer's community who had a flawed understanding of salvation and the means of receiving it.

This brings up an important question for us: What *is* the Gospel?

9that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. (Romans 10:9-10)

8For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

5He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, 6whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:5-6)

Salvation is a sovereign act of God. The Ephesians passage states that even the faith by which we are saved is given to us by Him, and the Titus passage states that we were saved only by His mercy. That said, the person that hears the Gospel and is saved will respond by confessing Jesus as his Lord, thus turning away from sin, and believing that He was raised and is alive. Many today espouse an idea that one can confess Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord. In other words, they walk down an aisle, pray a prayer, get baptized, and then go about their lives as if nothing had happened—not attending church, not studying the Word, not sharing the faith, living in unrepentant sinfulness as before. These people are, in all likelihood, not really saved, and their delusion can cost them their souls. The Bible teaches that Jesus becomes our Savior only when He becomes our Lord. The two are inseparable.

This is just one example of common misunderstandings or distortions of the Gospel. The point is that it is vital that we present the Gospel of Jesus Christ accurately, not watering it down or otherwise trying to make it more palatable to the listener or even to modern professing Christians' sensibilities. Any omission or distortion on our part is "exchanging the Truth of God for a lie" (see Romans 1:25), and can literally mean the difference between eternity with God and eternity in Hell to the ones with whom we share.

Moving ahead in Acts 19 and in our book, we see Paul continuing to present the Gospel.

8And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.10This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:8-10)

Paul goes to the synagogue, another place in which he is likely to encounter people that are interested in the things of God. Like the previous group, these people need to have their thinking and beliefs corrected since, as practicing Jews, their faith is obsolete. Notice that Paul makes an investment with these people—he spoke with them for three months, discussing, persuading, and reasoning from the Scriptures. For us, often the temptation is to try as fast as we can to get to the "meat" of the Gospel in the context in one short encounter, and to "shake the dust off our feet" if the person does not respond. Moreover, we get frustrated and feel like we are not witnessing enough if we do not have abundant, daily opportunities to share the complete Gospel with someone. While at times short encounters are all we get, Paul demonstrates the necessity of sharing with people over time whenever possible.

One commentator on this topic that I especially enjoy is Greg Koukl at Stand to Reason (www.str.org). Koukl espouses having a modest goal in presenting a Christian witness. Realizing that a rush through the entire Gospel may do more harm than good in some cases, his goal is simply to give the person something to think about concerning Christianity—to "put a stone in their shoe." Over time, these "stones," whether presented by one person or by a series of faithful Christian witnesses, can be used of God to bring a person to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. These "stones" can be thoughts, words, ideas, or even tracts, Bibles, and other literature. In other words, we should always live as faithful Christian witnesses, and we should be ready and willing to present the Gospel at any time. But, sometimes a faithful act of witness may mean telling someone you will pray for them, simply having an informal conversation about spiritual things, or even helping to meet someone's needs.

34"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40"Then the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.' (Matthew 25:36-40)

There is a second part of the Acts 19 passage that deserves comment. The Bible says that after certain members of the synagogue began to verbally attack Paul and his message, rather than persisting, Paul left them and met only with those that are interested in a separate facility.

Why would Paul do this? Was he right to essentially “give up” on those people?

6“Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces. (Matthew 7:6)

Christ Himself is speaking here, and instructs us, according to the commentaries I’ve read, to not waste our time preaching/witnessing to those that continually reject and ridicule the Scriptures and those that present them. (If time, discuss the OTJ Forum as an example.) Not only will no fruit be borne because of this, but it is also highly possible that something will take place that ultimately brings dishonor to God, or even keeps another person from being saved.

By Jesus’ standard, then, Paul was right to leave those people. Keep in mind, however, that Paul did not abandon speaking to these people for three months. In other words, he didn’t just look at them or talk to them once and decide that they were probably unwilling to hear the message—he persisted with them for a substantial length of time before deciding to go elsewhere. Remember also that God is able to change anyone’s heart, and we can certainly continue to pray for the salvation of those that ridicule and reject us, even if we are not actively witnessing to them.

In this passage, then, we see two important concepts: the necessity of sticking with a person or people for an extended amount of time, and also the reality that sometimes we must—and are commanded to—walk away.

Instead of reading only the passage in the book for this last section I would like to read verses 11-31 of Acts 19:

11God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul,12so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. 13But 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."14Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. 15And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" 16And 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. 17This 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. 18Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.19And 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. 20So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing. 21Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." 22And having sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while. 23About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. 24For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; 25these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 26" You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. 27" Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence." 28When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"29The city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia. 30And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him. 31Also some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent to him and repeatedly urged him not to venture into the theater. (Acts 19:11-31)

As was the case in the previous passage, it was determined that for Paul to face this crowd and perhaps become embroiled in controversy would be counterproductive, and possibly even dishonoring to the name of Christ. Besides that, this passage illustrates the truth that unbelievers, while sometimes simply ignoring or quietly ridiculing the Gospel, will engage in violent opposition to it when it somehow threatens their well-being. In this case, the idol merchants saw the conversion of people to Christ as a threat to their financial comfort. What are some other reasons why people might see the preaching of the Gospel as a threat worthy of a strong, forceful,

possibly even violent attack? To me, the primary non-materialistic reason for this is that the preaching of the Gospel makes them uncomfortable—due to the conviction of sin.

18For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20)

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

Not only is God's Word true, it is *God's* Word, and it communicates God's nature, desires, and intentions to us whether we like them or not. The Word *does* "cut" when it is preached, and those living contrary to its precepts will gladly do what they can to keep it from being preached to or discussed with them (recall "salt and light" discussion from last week). Even though they may say that *we* are the delusional ones, the Bible teaches that each person is intuitively aware of God's Law on at least a basic level. If they honestly believed that the Bible was just another book written by man and without meaning or use today, do you think they would be so desperate to shut it up? On the contrary, both their sinful natures and the servants of their master, Satan, (Matthew 6:24) cry out against the Truth and seek to destroy it. This, we know, will not be successful (1 Peter 1:24-25). Nevertheless, this struggle is at the heart of many of the cultural battles we face with the ACLU and like groups today, and in order to understand these events correctly we must be aware of the spiritual forces that are involved, and pray for God's protection, intervention, and victory in these cultural battles.

(Recap.) If we are to "maximize" the opportunities given us to serve Him, we must first of all know the Gospel that we are to preach, and be willing to preach it without adulteration or "watering down." We must be willing to proclaim it persistently, giving up on a person only when it becomes clear over time that he is unwilling to believe and perhaps even actively opposed to the Word. We must also be aware some unbelievers will react with great fury and wrath when confronted with the Word because it threatens their financial and/or emotional and spiritual well-being. Sometimes, as in this case, it is best to withdraw and avoid fanning the flames of controversy, lest God be somehow dishonored by it. At other times, it may be necessary that we confront the culture head on (Acts 18:22-34 – Mars Hill sermon). In every case, though, we must *pray* as we seek to serve Him and spread His Word, because only with His blessing will our efforts bear real fruit (1 Corinthians 3:6 – "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth").

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