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The Work of the Church Part 2

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Acts 19:1-10 (ESV)

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Mark 1:14-20

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.

Before we jump in to look at the text, I want to make some observations about the work of the church. That's what Acts is about. It's about, all of a sudden, the church being empowered to do the work that God commissioned it to do.

And when you read through Acts, there are some things that are included in this work, and there are many things that aren't included in this work. Luke is under the Spirit of God, emphasizing the work of the church—what the Holy Spirit empowers people to do. And so we see, as we study Acts, Paul and his disciples—they're doing certain things, and they're not doing other things.

One thing you don't see them doing in Acts is pursuing worldly titles, worldly accomplishments, notoriety, or personal gain. You don't see it happening here. There is no record of the disciples going into one of these cities, assessing the city's power structures, assessing the city's economic structures, and trying to discern how they might make the most money and attain the most power in that community.

We just don't read that here. We read something else.

Now, to be clear, there's nothing wrong with worldly titles. Many of the disciples had worldly titles. Paul had many worldly titles. He had achieved many titles before he even became a Christian. But Paul would write about those titles—they became like a dung heap to him, compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ.

All of that became, in a sense Paul describes, as meaningless to him. Like a dung heap, he said—worldly possessions, his worldly accomplishments, his worldly titles.

Certainly we see the Apostle Paul did some work in a worldly trade to attain some resources to fuel his mission. But we have no sense of him trying to make himself massively wealthy in this world. He was a tentmaker by trade, and as he would make tents and sell them, he would probably get some money. As a matter of fact, he took some pride in doing that so that the churches that he served didn't always have to give him money for the mission.

We see him doing some of these worldly things to fuel the mission, but we don't see any of them pursuing these things of first importance. They're in subjugation to this other work that they're doing.

Before the death and resurrection of Jesus, they did pursue these things. They argued, as a matter of fact, over who is going to be the greatest—who is going to have the best titles in the kingdom. But after the Spirit came upon them, those things were put to death in them.

We also don't see them pursuing worldly pleasures, worldly entertainments, or personal comforts. Matter of fact, quite the opposite. They had great discomfort in doing this work. I would suggest some of it was not that pleasurable.

When you read through the text—and we really don't read anything about them sitting around being entertained—a lot of the time they were about something else.

Now, if I've offended you in some way already, you're welcome. Because our world is filled with temptations for pleasures and numbing levels of entertainments and personal comforts. There are

millions and billions of dollars spent to get you and I to, in a sense, waste our time on trivial things in our world—the lust of the flesh, the boastful pride of life, and the lust of the eyes.

And to be about the work of the church, you have to die to these things.

Now, that isn't to say you can't have worldly titles and great wealth and enjoy the pleasures of this life. God, in His sovereignty, can allow these things if we keep them in perspective. But they are—they are not the work of the church. They aren't. They're not a part of what we're called to by Jesus.

Certainly, He provides everything for our enjoyment, but this is not a part of the mission and the work of eternity.

What the disciples were doing is they were making known—here's their work, as I can best describe it myself—making known to anyone they could. This is the work: making known to anyone they could the possibility of being a part of and growing in the glorious, eternal Kingdom of God forever.

It was just all-encompassing—inviting people into the Kingdom of Heaven forever in their brief time here on the earth.

When you study Acts, that's what you see.

Our Gospel reading says this is what Jesus was about. In Mark's accounting, he said, after John was arrested—John the Baptist, of course, came to prepare the way for Jesus, and he was making room in people's hearts, calling for repentance in people's hearts so that Jesus could be received by people.

After John was arrested and his work was done, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming—here it says—the Gospel of God. It's not a human message. It's a message, an invitation that comes outside this world from God Himself through His people to the world.

Jesus was proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent." Not just do what John said, but then go a little farther and believe in the good news of Jesus—the Gospel.

Matthew gave the accounting this way: after His temptation in the wilderness and the arresting of John the Baptist, Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Now we're in the context of where we're at. Paul is on his second missionary journey. The church is exploding by the power of the Holy Spirit. He's traveling north. He's coming around. He's passed through the inland country, come to Ephesus, and there he found some disciples.

So they are followers and disciples of—it doesn't say—and they're doing the work of sharing the good news of Jesus so that people can come under the reign of God and be a part of His family forever.

So he found some disciples, and he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

Paul has the message. He's carrying it into the world.

And they said, "No, we have not even heard there is a Holy Spirit."

Many people perish for lack of knowledge, the Bible says. And how can they know unless we tell them? Here's the work. Paul is doing this. He's traveled many miles. He gets into this city. He finds some disciples there. He's asking them what's happening with them—what do they know to be true?

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit?"

They said, "No, we've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

And he said, "Into what then were you baptized? Who are you following? What's the truth about your discipleship? Who have you rallied around?"

They said, "We were into John's baptism"—John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way for the Messiah.

Paul said to them—he's clarifying for them—he said, "You'll know the truth, and the truth will set you free," the Bible says. He's helping them. He's serving them. He's doing the work of the church by bringing them the truth.

Paul said to them, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance." That's good—turn away from your sin. "But you haven't been told the second half of the story. Turn away from your sin in the baptism of repentance. But then John said this: he told the people to believe in the one who is coming after him—that is, Jesus," the central figure in all of human history.

And so he clarified this for them.

And then, having heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. The salvation came upon their souls. Because salvation is found in no one else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we can be saved.

And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. There were about twelve men in all.

And now we have the birth of the church there in Ephesus, burgeoning forth by the unstoppable power of the Spirit.

And this is work, friends.

He entered the synagogue, and for three months spoke boldly. Do you know how much work that is? Speaking for three months?

He spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading all of Ephesus about the Kingdom of God.

Not in selfish pursuit, not trying to get rich there in Ephesus. He was proclaiming the Kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way—this is testimony to the spiritual battle in our world that just rages over truth and lies, Satan and God—speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them.

Jesus said, you know, if you're going and you're doing the work and people are resisting you, he said, brush the dust off your feet and move on, because maybe their hearts need softened a little bit more. So he withdrew from them. He did this earlier from people who were resisting him, and he said, "Now your blood's off my back."

Some people just don't want to hear it, friends. Some people want to be their own gods. And until God softens their heart, all we can do is pray.

So he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him. They just pulled out. But they didn't quit working. Rejection didn't stop them. They weren't that soft on the inside. They weren't so easily melted. They didn't take offense so easily as our world does, because they were being empowered by something outside of this world.

He withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, and then began reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus—not in the synagogue—and they continued for two years.

Listen to this: two years, so that all the residents of Asia—think of it—all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord. It didn't matter their background, Jew or Greek. Imagine the work of it, empowered by the Spirit.

The work of the church, friends—it doesn't have to do with our flesh and satisfying our flesh. It doesn't have to do with worldly gain. It has to do with giving ourselves to an eternal, life-changing, saving, powerful message that has been given to us by God for the world.

And Jesus said, those who have been given a trust—here's what he said—must prove faithful.

And so I just ask you today, friend, for those of you that know Christ, that you're a part of the church: what are you spending most of your time doing? What are you spending most of your time doing?

I am so thankful for so many who have given so much time and energy and resources to the work of the church here at Nazareth and in our community. But I just ask you, as we're studying Acts and we see this, there's a lot of things to give time and energy and resources to in the world—neat things that don't last forever.

And there's only one thing that lasts forever, and that is the souls of people who've been spoken to and brought alive by the Word of God. They've come to believe, they've been adopted into His family, and then they will glorify God forever in eternity.

The work of the church is to go on in season and out of season, day and night, consistently.

How are you spending your time, your energy, and your resources? This is a massive team effort by all of God's people in the world.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for Your Word, which teaches us so clearly about this life. We ask that Your Holy Spirit would do its work—continue to bring life to us for Your purposes, for Your plan.

We ask that as we look at what You've done in history, You would speak to us about what You're calling us to do right now, in this time, in this place in history, in our community.

Father, we ask that You would embolden Your church and strengthen Your church. Cause Your church to continue to rise up—to say no to lesser things and yes to greater things—so that we might experience just a taste of what Your early church experienced: the supernaturally empowering work of Your Spirit, doing things of which no mind can conceive, no ear has heard about, no one can comprehend.

Give us a sense of awe and wonder about Your abilities, Your calling on our lives, and Your work.

We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen