

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Mass Hysteria at Ephesus

Acts 19:21–41

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 19 as we continue our verse-by-verse study of this book. Our series through Acts is entitled, "No Other Name." And the title for today's message is "Mass Hysteria at Ephesus." What caused the mass hysteria at Ephesus? Let's just say some combination of politics, economics, and theology.¹ And for the record, that's not unusual.²

In the early 1500s, there was a monk named Martin Luther who was deeply troubled by what he saw in the church of his day. He wasn't trying to start a revolution or dismantle the church. At least, not at first. Luther was a professor of theology who genuinely cared about the spiritual condition of ordinary people.

And as he traveled and taught, he watched poor farmers, widows, and working families give away their hard-earned money, because they had been told that indulgences could reduce time in purgatory or secure forgiveness for sins. People were being led to believe that salvation could be purchased rather than received as a gift of God's grace through faith. So, in 1517, overwhelmed with grief and conviction, Luther walked to the church door in Wittenberg and put up his famous 95 Theses.

Now many people correctly assume that Luther's concerns were theological, and they were—but they were also economical. The church at that time had developed a massive system built on the sale of indulgences, a religious fundraising scheme that generated enormous amounts of cash to support building projects, mostly in Rome. When Luther challenged those indulgences, he wasn't just questioning doctrine; he was disrupting the whole system. And once that income stream was threatened, outrage followed quickly.

Luther became a wanted man. He was declared a heretic and condemned by powerful leaders. Why? Because Luther had not only challenged their theology—he challenged their economy. His experience reminds us that economics and theology are often far more intertwined than we want to admit. The moment someone threatens your money, they often threaten your functional god.

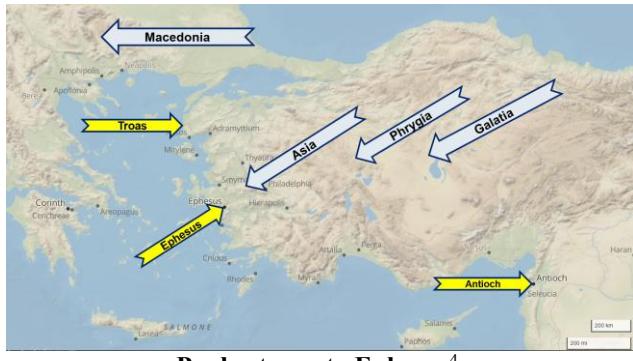
But economic manipulation didn't begin in the 1500s. And bad theology supporting an economic enterprise didn't start in Wittenberg, Germany, in the days of Martin Luther. Those things are as old as time. And we're going to see an example of that today in Acts 19.³

First the context. In the previous passages in Acts, we saw Paul leave Antioch and begin his third missionary journey. And very quickly he lands in Ephesus where Priscilla and Aquila have already been ministering.

¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 609: "For Luke, the battle Paul wages is not a political one with Rome but with a worldview that takes people captive into empty idolatry. The battle is real, as Pliny the Younger (*Ep.* 10.96) in about AD 112 records how Rome's strong suppression of Christianity in another part of the empire (Bithynia) led to the reoccupation of abandoned temples and to the revival of participation in festivals (Conzelmann 1987: 165)."

² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 410: "The gospel is always at its most controversial when it comes into conflict with economic interests."

³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 606–7: "Several details reflect solid local knowledge: the reference to the temple keeper (v. 35), the commerce surrounding silver shrines (v. 24), the reference to Asiarchs (v. 31), and the role of the scribe of the people, or town clerk (an elected official, v. 35). Thus Luke has solid sources for this event."



Paul returns to Ephesus⁴

Paul stays about three years total in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). And some incredible things happen in Ephesus around this time. If you remember from last time, Priscilla and Aquila approached Apollos and brought him into the Christian fold (Acts 18:24–28). Paul also addressed a group of “John the Baptist disciples” in Ephesus and brought them into the Christian fold (Acts 19:1–7). And then we saw the seven sons of Sceva. Remember those guys? Those guys went on to become the seven “streakers” of Sceva. They were beaten up by a demoniac, and they ran out of the house bleeding and naked (Acts 19:11–16).

Just as a refresher, look at what happened after that in **verse 17**.

¹⁷ And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.

This incident involving the seven sons of Sceva lit a fire under the Christians in Ephesus. **Verse 18** says,

¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices... ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

So Paul has this little revival that erupts in Ephesus. There's some serious spiritual warfare taking place here. And the Christians are taking ground. And the word of the Lord continues to increase. This is awesome!

So good things are happening in Ephesus. And Satan is taking his lumps. But Satan and his minions are about to mobilize. **Let me say it this way—The Empire Strikes Back.**⁵ Look at **verse 21**.

²¹ Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must⁶ also see Rome.”⁷

This is Luke's way of signaling that Paul's time in Ephesus (the three years) is coming to an end. By the way, the whole rest of the book of **Acts** is essentially Paul's complex and circuitous journey to the city of Rome.⁸ Eventually he gets there as a prisoner.⁹ But more on that later.

Look at **verse 22**.

²² And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

⁴ Atlas taken from Logos Bible Study, Computer software. *Logos Bible Study Atlas* (Bellingham: Faithlife, LLC), November 13, 2025. Some geographical points added by author.

⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 614: “Luke relates both the initial success and the reaction of the opposition. He is a realist and knows that some will not take well to growth of the gospel... those who do not wish to be transformed will often react with hostility to the evidence of a lifestyle that challenges their own.”

⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 605: “The divine sense of ‘must’ in the verse suggests a combination of wills. It appears that Paul has a resolve that he lays before God to see if it is from the Spirit.”

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 406–7: “The best commentary on this passage is Paul's own discussion of his plans in Rom 15, which was written from Corinth probably within a year or so of this point in the Ephesian ministry. There Paul spoke of his desire to carry on a mission in Spain and the western portion of the empire, probably hoping that Rome would sponsor him in the undertaking (Rom 15:24, 28). As in Acts 19:21, he explained that his route must first take him to Jerusalem. Acts is silent about the reason for going first to Jerusalem, but Paul explained to the Romans that a collection for the Jerusalem Christians necessitated his going there before proceeding to Rome (Rom 15:25–31). This also explains the reference to his visiting Macedonia and Achaia in Acts 19:21. Paul made it a point to revisit and strengthen his congregations, but in this particular instance his epistles reveal that he was particularly preoccupied with the collection on this final visit to Macedonia and Achaia.”

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 606: “This is the beginning of a sequence of texts indicating that going to Rome is a part of Paul's divine destiny (Acts 20:23; 21:11, 13; 23:11; 27:23–25).”

⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 606: “The scene also parallels Jesus's having to go to Jerusalem in Luke's Gospel (9:51; 13:33–34).”

Paul rarely worked alone. He always had helpers and disciples and understudies and emissaries. So he sends two of those helpers, Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia. Timothy, we know.¹⁰ Erastus, we don't know.¹¹ Ostensibly Paul sends them to Macedonia to prepare for his visit. But he stays in Asia (i.e., Ephesus) a little longer.

By the way, Paul wrote the book of **1 Corinthians** from Ephesus during this time. And in that book, he writes, "I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective ministry has opened to me, [but] there are many adversaries" (**1 Cor 16:8–9**).

You might ask, "**What kind of adversaries, Paul? You mean the seven sons of Sceva?**" Well, yes. But something even more sinister and certainly more adversarial than that is brewing in Ephesus.

Look at **verse 23**.¹²

²³ About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. ²⁴ For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. ²⁵ These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth."¹³

Notice the connection here between economics and worship.¹⁴ And remember now, the Christians in Ephesus were willing to burn their expensive books that connected them to the occult.¹⁵ These guys, instead, protect their financial interests at any cost.¹⁶

²⁶ And you see and hear¹⁷ that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded¹⁸ and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with [human] hands are not gods.¹⁹

Now, let's be clear about what's happening here in Ephesus. Demetrius is upset not just because cultural values are being threatened... and not just because the status quo is being threatened... more than anything he's

¹⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 407: "Timothy was last mentioned in 18:5, where he had joined Paul at Corinth."

¹¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 606: "The same Erastus may or may not be mentioned in Rom. 16:23, as the name is common, but in 2 Tim. 4:20 it is likely the same person."

¹² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 98: "Acts 19:23 is one of the most understated verses in all the Bible. Just when things were supposed to go according to Paul's plans, a seismic disturbance shook things up."

¹³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 804: "About fifty-five years after Paul's ministry in Ephesus, Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia, warned the emperor Trajan that what he called the 'superstition' of the followers of Jesus—which has been 'not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts'—posed a threat to the economy of the region since people were buying fewer sacrificial animals. In his letter Pliny assured the emperor that his forceful measures against the Christians was resulting in the revival of the sacred festivals."

¹⁴ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 608: "Luke often notes how material concerns get in the way of responding properly to God (Luke 16:1–14; Acts 1:17–20; 5:1–11; 8:20–22; 16:16–18)."

¹⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 31: "True Christianity calls for a spirit of sacrifice, even financially, but our pleasure-seeking, hedonistic economy rests on a hoped-for profit margin."

¹⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 407: "In direct opposition to the Ephesian Christians, who were willing to make a monetary sacrifice for their faith, were the pagan craftsmen of Ephesus, who found Paul's witness to be damaging their financial interests."

¹⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 803: "While no silver replicas of the temple of Artemis have been discovered (yet), the archaeological evidence shows that various industries participated in the production of devotional objects related to the cult of Artemis; a figure of Artemis made of lead and a miniature marble temple of Artemis have been discovered. Luke uses two present tense verbs to describe the artisans' awareness of what was happening: they 'observe' (θεωρεῖτε) and 'hear' (ἀκούετε) the activity of 'this Paul,' which is described with two verbs in the aorist tense: by 'persuad[ing]' (πειστας, modal participle) people not only in the city of Ephesus but in 'almost' (σχεδόν) the entire (πάσης) province of Asia to accept his teaching, he has 'misled' (μετέστησεν) a considerable number of people. The term ὥχλος reflects the effect of Paul's preaching and teaching: a large 'crowd' of people was converted to faith in Jesus. Luke's previous description in vv. 10, 20 suggests that Demetrius is not exaggerating."

¹⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 410: "Paul was said to be leading astray (literally, 'seducing') all the people in Ephesus and throughout Asia, denying that idols were real gods."

¹⁹ JOHANNES BRENZ: "By this speech Demetrius wants to seem pious and prudent. For prudent people work for the provision of their family and see to it that they do not go hungry. Pious people have regard for the public religion over and above their own vocation. But if you shake out the character of Demetrius, you will find, instead of true prudence and piety, in reality a seditious and impious character. For he did not formulate the piece that he delivered about defending the majesty of Diana from the zeal of his religious fervor but a zeal for his profit and from greed... Furthermore, even if the religion of Diana were true, though it is very false, still Demetrius would be defending her impiously, given that he was pleading his case for his own gain under the pretext of religion." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 271.

upset about economics!²⁰ Right? He's essentially saying the quiet part out loud: **“This guy, Paul, is affecting our wallets! We've got to put a stop to this.”**²¹

Now just a little bit about Ephesus and these silversmiths. In Greek mythology, Artemis was the daughter of Zeus. She was a fertility goddess.²² People would buy and venerate her idols in the hopes that she would bless them with children, good crops, and success in business.²³

Archeologists have actually found many of these idols in Ephesus. Here's an example of one of them.



Figure 1

You can see with this little icon Artemis and her many breasts. This symbolized her power over fertility. Her festivals in Ephesus were often marked by orgies and drunkenness.

And Artemis was the patron goddess of Ephesus.²⁴ The massive “Temple of Artemis” or the “Temple of Diana” was constructed in Ephesus. And this temple was four times larger than the Parthenon. It was a huge, magnificent structure.²⁵ It was the largest building in the Roman world at this time. And it's one of the seven ancient wonders of the world.²⁶

The temple was eventually destroyed, but here's one artist's depiction of it.

²⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: “Notice how in every case idolatry arises from money. With those people it was because of money, and likewise here. They did not fear that their religion was in danger but that their skills might no longer have a market.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 242.

²¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 410: “It was not his piety that was offended but his pocketbook.”

²² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 607: “Artemis, Ephesus's major goddess, was known as a goddess of fertility and as ‘mistress of the wild beasts,’ a daughter of Zeus and Leto, and a sister of Apollo. In Roman religion she was known as Diana. In this cult she was a virgin who helped women in childbirth, a huntress with bow and arrow, and the goddess of death. Her role in Ephesus paralleled the role of the great Anatolian mother goddess Cybele, since Artemis had become the product of syncretism.”

²³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 409: “In Ephesus the worship of the goddess centered around the Artemision, a week in the spring dedicated to the goddess. The highlight of the festivities was a solemn processional in which the image of the goddess was carried through the streets between the theater and the temple. Throughout the week there were numerous events, including ritual plays and dances. In former times the primary attendants of the goddess were self-emasculated priests, but there is some question whether the Romans allowed such practices in the cult of Paul's day.”

²⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 804: “The sphere of influence of Artemis Ephesia is attested by the existence of sanctuaries of the goddess in other cities throughout the Roman world (e.g., elsewhere in Asia Minor in Aphrodisias, Sardis, Smyrna; in Alea, Corinth, Skillous, in Greece; in Massilia in Gaul; in Emporion, Rhode, and Saguntum in Spain, on the island of Chios) and by over fifty cities in Asia Minor which minted coins of the *Artemis Ephesia* type.”

²⁵ Sproul, *Acts*, 333: “It was constructed of 127 pillars, and each pillar was 60 feet high. The walls of the temple were adorned by the ancient sculptor Praxiteles, the Michelangelo of his time.” Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 408–9: “The entire edifice was elaborately adorned in brilliant colors and gold leaf. The altar area was 20 feet square and contained a massive image of the goddess with a veiled head, with animals and birds decorating her head and lower body and numerous breasts from her waist to her neck.”

²⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 608.



Temple of Diana

Interestingly the temple wasn't formally destroyed or burned down. It was just taken apart piece by piece later so that the stones could be used for churches. How's that for a cruel, providential irony!²⁷

But that was later. In Paul's day, the temple was a massive part of the Ephesian economy.²⁸ And many people, like this Demetrius, were dependent on religious tourism.²⁹ People would come to Ephesus, buy these little statue gods, and bring them to the temple to pray and ask for blessings. **So Paul denouncing Artemis in Ephesus would be like someone going to Orlando today and denouncing Mickey Mouse! That's going to affect the local economy!**

In other words, Paul's preaching was a threat.³⁰ Paul's preaching could put Demetrius and the other idol makers out of business. Paul's statement that "gods made with human hands are not gods" (19:26) is a gauntlet thrown down attacking the economic underpinnings of the city. Why would that be perceived as a threat? **Do people really care more about economics than they do the truth?**³¹

You know what I find interesting in these verses is that Demetrius and these idol makers, they never stop and ask themselves, "Hmm, I wonder if Paul's right?" "Why do we worship man-made images and take them to a man-made temple for worship?" "Maybe there's a better way?" "Maybe there is one sovereign God over the universe?"³²

²⁷ In fairness, the same thing can be said about the Hagia Sofia in Istanbul. At one time, it was a house of worship for Christians. Today, it functions as a mosque. Why didn't the Christian God defend this house of worship? Does he feel obligated to protect these edifices? Well, the secret things of the Lord belong to the Lord (Deut 29:29), and God's ways are higher than ours (Isa 55:8–9). But we should also be clear that God does not promise to preserve buildings. He promises to preserve his people. And Jesus never said the gates of hell would not prevail against church property. He said they would not prevail against his church (Matt 16:18).

²⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 409: "The temple received lavish votive offerings from the devotees of the mother goddess. In fact, so wealthy was it that it became the principal financial institution of Asia, receiving deposits and making loans."

²⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 804: "The grand structure in which the famous image of 'the great goddess Artemis' (ἡ μεγάλη θεὰ Ἀρτεμίς) awed thousands of visitors to the temple, the sanctuary famous for its size and antiquity and for its beauty and works of art, the 'common bank of Asia' and the 'refuge of necessity' granting asylum to people unjustly accused of murder or facing imprisonment."

³⁰ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 99: "It is evident, therefore, that the gospel invades every sphere of life. Even economic policies cannot escape from the transformative power of the gospel. When the gospel comes into contact with other ways of 'doing life,' it will cause friction. The gospel confronts the sinfulness inherent in the systems of our society."

³¹ JOHN CALVIN: "A man is entitled to pay a certain amount of attention to his own private source of income. But it is certainly a thoroughly disgraceful thing to disturb the public peace, to pervert human and divine justice, to stoop to violence and slaughter, to make a serious attempt at destroying what is just and right, for his own interest. Demetrius admits that the heart of the matter is that Paul says that gods made by human hands are not gods at all. He does not inquire whether that is true or not, but, blinded by his passion for money making, he is driven to destroy the true teaching." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 271.

³² JOHN CALVIN: "Let us learn to choose the kind of life that is consistent with the teaching of Christ, so that eagerness for gain may not incite us to take up arms in an impious and wicked battle. But let those who, through ignorance or error, have fallen into some bad occupation, or have become entangled in some other vicious and impure way of life, nevertheless be on their guard against such rash sacrilege." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 270.

They never ask themselves these questions. They are so fixated on the status quo... they are so distracted by their own personal economics... they are so deluded by their own cultural trappings that they can't see truth. **Does that happen in our day?**

Here's the first point from the message today. Go ahead and write this down. I want to give you from the text ...

Three reasons your gods aren't worthy of your worship:

Here's the first.

1) They are created things, not the **Creator** (Acts 19:21–26)

Now, be careful here. Don't get too judgy with these pagan polytheists from Ephesus. Because before we're done, I'm going to give you "Four 'good things' that we turn into gods." And when I say "we," I mean "we" in the church as well as the modern world.³³ So stay tuned for that.

But first let's deal with these Ephesians. Paul says, "gods made with human hands are not gods" (19:26). And that's true. Even though Luke doesn't quote Paul directly on that point here (this is a quote from Demetrius), that's the kind of thing that Paul would say. Paul says elsewhere in **1 Corinthians**, "We know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one" (8:4). Paul said previously in **Athens**, "We ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man" (Acts 17:29). Isaiah, in the OT, mocks people who worship idols. He scoffs at those who would cut down a tree and use part of the tree for firewood to cook their food, but then they use the other part of the tree to carve an idol to bow down and worship (Isa 44:9–20).

Obviously both Paul and Isaiah are taking their cue from the Ten Commandments. The first of the Ten Commandments says "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). And what's the second commandment? "You shall not make for yourself a carved image" (Exod 20:4).

Speaking of the first commandment, **Martin Luther** argued that this commandment was strategically placed first: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). He concluded that you never break commandments two through ten (Exod 20:3–17) without also breaking the first commandment. I think he's right.

So the issue here in Ephesus is an issue as old as time. You've got pagan Gentiles worshipping created things instead of the Creator. And the Apostle Paul is saying, **"Stop it! Your 'gods' aren't worthy of your worship!"**

Now, let me say this. When I look at these silversmiths, I don't think their biggest mistake was making graven images. That's a problem, for sure. I don't even think their biggest mistake was pursuing economics over truth. That's part of the issue. The core issue that they have is self-worship not idol-worship. They think that deity existed for humanity, not humanity for deity. They wanted to protect the notion that "gods" existed for them and for their personal gain instead of the notion that we exist for God and for his purposes. Are you with me? The great sin of these silversmiths isn't idol-worship, it's self-worship. And they don't *ultimately* serve Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus; they serve themselves.

Here's the insight for us. Don't ever tolerate teaching, inside the church or outside the church, that promotes a god who exists for you instead of a God for whom you exist. The church is for God. We exist for God. Our lives have purpose because of God. God doesn't exist to accommodate us and enrich us. We exist to worship and serve the God of the universe. He doesn't serve us.

Now back to the text. Here's where the story gets wild. Because these silversmiths and craftsmen never stop to consider, **"Yeah, why do we serve gods made with hands?"** They instead are persuaded by Demetrius's fearmongering.

Look at **verse 27**. This is still Demetrius talking.

³³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 99–100: "In a post-Christian world, therefore, there will sometimes be no way for the gospel and society to peacefully co-exist, and the backlash from the society might be fierce, particularly when the gospel threatens livelihoods. Modern Westerners are just as idolatrous. We often worship ideas, ambition, or power as objects of idolatry. In the same ludicrous way, we take something less than God and render to it worship, of which only God is worthy."

²⁷ And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.”³⁴

“Heaven forbid that Artemis would be deposed of her magnificence!” Here’s my question for Demetrius, “If her magnificence is so magnificent, then why can she keep herself from being deposed?”

“No, no, no. We’ve got to protect our goddess, because she can’t protect herself.”³⁵ That’s illogical!

Those of you who know your OT, know that there’s a similar story in Judges where Gideon tears down the altar of Baal. And the people of the town want to kill him. And Gideon’s father is a voice of reason in that moment. He says, “Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? … If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down” (Judg 6:31). Gideon actually got a second name that day which was Jerubbaal, which means, “Let Baal contend against him” (6:32).

Here’s something to keep in mind as Christians. I’m all for apologetics, and I think there’s a place to give a defense for our faith and for the true God of the universe. But let me be crystal clear—God doesn’t *need* us to contend for him. God doesn’t *need* us to defend his actions or his reputation. God is not wringing his hands up in heaven worried about his reputation. He can take care of that himself. And he will. So you don’t have to walk around thinking to yourself, “Boy, I’ve got to protect the Lord’s reputation. I got to defend him against all those people who despise him.” God will take care of himself.

Now for Artemis, that’s a different matter. She’s nothing more than a figment of the human imagination. So Demetrius gives this rousing speech about protecting her reputation and watch what happens.

Look at verse 28.

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged

“What! What! We’re going to lose our income.” “What! The reputation of the city will be tainted. Not on my watch!” They were enraged. “Nobody’s going to talk bad about our goddess!”

²⁸ When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel.³⁶

Here’s a recent picture of the theater in Ephesus.³⁷ It’s pretty well-preserved after twenty centuries.



The Ephesus Theater³⁸

³⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 410: “The statement that Artemis was worshipped in Asia and the entire world was clearly an exaggeration on the part of Demetrius. Still, no goddess was more widely revered. Archaeologists have discovered temples of Artemis in Gaul and Spain. Now, all this splendor was in danger of being set aside by one man, and a Jew at that!”

³⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 613: “The argument is the kind of levelheaded statement that we hear from Gamaliel in Acts 5:33–39. If Artemis is really a goddess, then we do not need to worry about her demise. Of course, the key issue is whether the ‘if’ premise is correct. If goddesses and idols are really powerless, then his argument fails.”

³⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 806: “The two missionaries were probably displayed on the stage of the theater (*skene*) as delinquents.”

³⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 806: “The Salutaris inscription relates that during processions, which may have occurred at least once every two weeks, 31 gold and silver statues and images, including nine statues of Artemis, were carried from the temple of Artemis to the city and into the theater, where they were placed on inscribed bases during the assembly, and were brought back to the temple at the end of the proceedings.”

³⁸ This picture is part of “The Museum Collection” of Todd Bolen and A.D. Riddle. Used here with permission.

The theater was estimated to hold more than 20,000 people.³⁹ **That's about the size of the crowd at the Frost Bank Center for a Spurs game.** And these silversmiths drag two of Paul's companions into the theater while the people were shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" So imagine yourself as one of Paul's companions in this scene right now. There are 20,000 people shouting together as you are being dragged into this theater. Let me just ask you, if you were Gaius or Aristarchus, would you be scared? I would be.⁴⁰

What about Paul? Where's he right now. Well, look at **verse 30.**

³⁰ But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, [He must have seen all of this coming down the city streets, and decided to intervene] the disciples would not let him.⁴¹

They wouldn't let him probably because the mob would have ripped Paul into pieces.⁴² **Are there times when disciples need to step in and protect their leaders? Absolutely.**⁴³

³¹ And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater.

These "Asiarchs" were probably unbelieving Gentile administrators over the city.⁴⁴ It's amazing that they were friends with Paul, which seems to suggest that Paul was actively making friends with unbelievers in Ephesus. That's not that hard to believe.⁴⁵ And even they didn't want Paul to go to the theater! Why not? Because it was utter pandemonium there! It was mass hysteria and mass confusion!⁴⁶

And look at this... **verse 32.**

³² Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Now just think about this for a second. These guys over here are yelling, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" These guys over here are yelling—I don't know—"Down with the temple tax" or something like that. And this guy over here is screaming, "The British are coming." And most of the people there were like, "Why are we here again?" It wasn't just mass hysteria; it was mass confusion.

I remember a few years ago there were these riots that took place in Croatia during the summer. Some people got together for a political rally. But there was this group of people that just wanted to create a ruckus. I don't know, maybe they worked for "rent-a-riot" or something like that?

And the political rally turned into mob violence. And I remember asking my brother-in-law, "Dalibor, what is this?" And he said that some of the rioters were soccer fans that were just looking for a

³⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 610: "The theater at Ephesus eventually came to have a capacity of twenty-four thousand people, and huge civic assemblies were held there three times a year... The theater is cut impressively into the western slope of Mount Pion (Panayir), facing west toward the harbor. Still beautifully preserved, it reaches a height today of 100 feet into the mountain and is the most impressive of the wonderful collection of remains at Ephesus."

⁴⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 31: "In the latter half of the nineteenth century in England, an ostensibly Christian nation, the Salvation Army underwent terrible persecution because their Christianity touched the pocketbooks of society. Richard Collier, historian of the Salvation Army, says the attacks were led by publicans and brothel-keepers, and these antagonists organized the 'Skeleton Army.'"

⁴¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 416: "In Romans 16:3–4, he wrote that Priscilla and Aquila had risked their own lives to save him in Ephesus."

⁴² CHRYSOSTOM: "Paul was persuaded, since he was neither vainglorious nor ostentatious.... Knowing his eagerness, they begged him, since all these faithful loved him so much." Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 243.

⁴³ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 408: "In 1 Corinthians 15:32, Paul wrote: *I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus*, which was probably a reference to the experience described in these verses. Since Paul was a Roman citizen and could not be thrown to the beasts, he was using the expression figuratively to describe being exposed to possible mob violence."

⁴⁴ I disagree with Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 102 who states that these Asiarchs are "probably Jewish leaders dispersed throughout Asia."

⁴⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 611: "That Paul has such friends shows his influence and impact. That they would be urging (*παρεκάλουν*, *parekaloun*) him to avoid the danger shows these leaders' concern or at least that they are less easily upset than the larger crowds (Bruce 1990: 418). At the least, they recognize that if Paul dives in, then the situation could become even more chaotic. The remark fits the setting. The imperfect verb—they 'were urging' (*παρεκάλουν*) him not to go—points to the ongoing nature of the appeal."

⁴⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 411: "This incident may be the background to what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 1:8–9: *Concerning our affliction which befell us in Asia ... yea, we ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves.*"

fight. They were just a bunch of soccer hooligans looking to express their hooliganism. Crazy Europeans. We never see anything like that in America.

So here's what happens. Look at **verse 33**.

³³ Some of the crowd prompted Alexander,⁴⁷ whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd.⁴⁸ ³⁴ But when they recognized that he was a Jew [By the way, here's another instance of latent antisemitism in the Roman world],⁴⁹ for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" "Great is Artemis of..." Are you annoyed by that already? How many of you want me to stop? I didn't even do that for two minutes.⁵⁰ Can you imagine two hours of that!⁵¹

I mean, our service on Sunday morning lasts about an hour and a half here at Messiah. And our God is, unlike Artemis, actually awesome. But I can't imagine us just getting together for two hours yelling (or singing) the same thing over and over again. Surely, we can incorporate more variety and creativity than that into our worship.

But here's the thing. These guys aren't just shouting as an act of worship. They are trying to protect the reputation of their goddess, which has been tainted by Paul and his preaching. Her reputation was theirs to protect.

Write this down as a second point from our message. Three reasons your gods aren't worthy of your worship. Here's the second reason.

2) They are powerless and require **protection** (Acts 19:27-34)

Now if you're looking for additional proof as to why "little 'g' gods" aren't worthy of worship, watch this. Watch how easily these Ephesians go from mass hysteria in the protection of their goddess to almost total indifference. This is really surprising.

Look at **verse 35**.

³⁵ And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd,

When I imagine this guy, I just imagine a really nerdy guy with glasses and a pencil behind his ears. And it must have been a tough job for him to get the crowd quiet after two hours of yelling and screaming. Maybe they got tired of chanting the same stupid chant for so long.

... [and] he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?"⁵²

What in the world? What's he talking about? Well, legend had it that the image of Artemis in the temple had fallen from heaven to earth as a meteor.⁵³ It was pure superstition. But the Ephesians believed it.

⁴⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 413: "This man may have been the same Alexander who was the coppersmith of 2 Timothy 4:14. He was also from Ephesus and did much evil to Paul."

⁴⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 611: "Paul's presence seems to have disturbed an uneasy civil tolerance between Jews and Greeks and their religious views."

⁴⁹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 611-2: "Alexander's defense likely makes a distinction between members of this new movement and Jews (Pesch 1986b: 181). Le Cornu and Shulam (2003: 1081) have another take on the scene, arguing that Alexander wants to quell the reaction against Paul, fearing that it will spill over into a blaming of all Jews. Either option is possible. In fact, this second view is even likely, given that Jews also would have found Artemis worship objectionable. Paul's presence seems to have disturbed an uneasy civil tolerance between Jews and Greeks and their religious views. Roloff (1988: 293) suggests that Alexander might be an elder of the Jewish community. As was the case earlier (18:14-15), the Gentiles have trouble separating the new movement from Judaism. Only the intervention of a town clerk will bring calm."

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 31: "Can you imagine chanting 'Great are the Fortyniners of San Francisco!' or 'Great are the Rolling Stones' or 'Great is the President of the United States' for two hours without a break!"

⁵¹ Sproul, *Acts*, 334: "It was common in the ancient world to pray and offer praise and honor to a deity with repetitious chants, a practice the New Testament warns us against."

⁵² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 810: "This description was a clever response to the accusation leveled by Demetrius against Paul and his converts who say that gods made with hands are not gods (v. 26), and it is a clever response to the Jews (who are also the target of the tumult) who believe that the images worshiped in the temples of the Greek and Roman cities are the work of human hands. The city clerk argues that given the special relationship between Ephesus and Artemis and given the divine origin of the image of Artemis in her Ephesian temple, there is no reason why they should be concerned about people who claim otherwise, let alone start a riot."

³⁶ Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. ³⁷ For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious⁵⁴ nor blasphemers of our goddess.⁵⁵

By the way, I don't know if he's right about this. Paul and his companions are kind of blaspheming the goddess Artemis. I think they are more of a threat than this guy wants to admit.⁵⁶

But anyways, he continues...

³⁸ If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint⁵⁷ against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. ³⁹ But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly.⁵⁸

Not in this mob!

⁴⁰ For we really are in danger⁵⁹ of being charged with rioting today,⁶⁰ since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion."⁴¹ And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly.

What? After all that? Talk about an anticlimax. The town clerk was like, "**We could all go to jail for this.**" And the crowd was like, "**Oh no! Well then, let's go home.**"

Really? After shouting for two hours? The situation hasn't even changed. Paul is still in the city. People are still preaching Christ, which is bad for business. The reputation of your goddess is still under attack.

With all due respect to this "town clerk," I don't think he grasps the severity of the situation. I think Demetrius had it right. The reputation of the goddess is under attack. The preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is sacrilegious and blasphemous towards their goddess. I think this guy, the town clerk, is more concerned about peace at any price than really defending the honor of his goddess.⁶¹ Maybe he knows the whole thing is a sham!

⁵³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 413: "The clerk's reference to an 'image ... from heaven' probably meant a meteorite. Meteorites were often associated with the worship of the Mother Goddess. The most famous of these was the sacred stone taken from Pessinus to Rome in 204 B.C. A meteorite also seems to have been associated with the cult of the Taurian Artemis. Although there is no evidence beyond this text for such a sacred stone being connected with the Ephesian cult, it is altogether likely that one existed, given this common association of the mother goddess with a 'stone from heaven.'"

⁵⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 102: "The town clerk outlines a two-part charge of which he declares the Christians innocent. The first, of being 'sacrilegious,' likely implied a charge of robbing the temple. Temple-robbing was a really big business. Pagan temples fascinated robbers for several reasons. First, pagan temples were architectural gems. People could crack off a corner of the temple of Artemis and sell it for a large profit. Second, the idols themselves were coated with precious stones and metals. The gifts brought to the idols, however, enticed the robbers above anything else. The idol was like a big Christmas tree with nice—and expensive—gifts all around it. Gaius, Aristarchus, and the other believers in Ephesus, however, had no interest in stealing from the temple; the town clerk recognized that Christians would not do this." Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 414: "Some Jews, as those in Romans 2:22, were indeed guilty of the first crime, since oftentimes pagan temples had vast treasures, like banks today."

⁵⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 811: "Slandering one of the deities worshiped in a city, in particular the tutelary god (such as Artemis in Ephesus), could have been prosecuted under the rubric of impiety (ἀσέβεια), an offense that had no defined content but was serious. Socrates was executed on account of this charge: the formal indictment ran 'Socrates does wrong by not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges, and introducing other, new powers. He also does wrong by corrupting the young.'"

⁵⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 410: "In all fairness to Demetrius, his argument was not without solid foundation. Paul did preach forcefully against idolatry and was indeed a threat to anyone who made a living from idols. He was likewise a genuine threat to the Artemis cult."

⁵⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 613: "Here the term λόγος (*logos*) is used in its technical legal sense of a legal complaint against someone, a lawsuit."

⁵⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 613: "The clerk then notes that if they wish to go beyond a personal case, then there is the assembly (ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*), which met as often as three times a month by the fourth century, in the time of John Chrysostom." Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 412n42: "Ἐκκλησία is the term used throughout the NT for the Christian assembly, the church. Behind the NT usage, however, stands not the Greek town meeting but the LXX rendering of the Hebrew term *qahal* (the 'called out' people of God) by the Greek ἐκκλησία."

⁵⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 414: "A subtlety occurs in the text at this point. A rather rare word occurs in vv. 27, 40, the verb meaning *to be in danger, to be running a risk* (*kindyneuō*). In v. 27 Demetrius argued that Paul was a danger to Ephesus. In v. 40 the clerk clarified where the real danger lay—not from Paul but from the unruly Ephesians."

⁶⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 812–3: "A city could lose not only the respect of the emperor or the proconsuls, but local officials could be punished, guilds could be disbanded, and the city could lose its autonomy. When the city of Cyzicus allowed some Roman citizens to be put to death in 20 BC, evidently in connection with a riot, the autonomy (freedom) of the city was rescinded."

⁶¹ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 102–3: "Either the clerk did not understand what was going on, or he did understand and decided he could not allow this kind of riot to become a punitive trial."

Now don't get me wrong, I'm glad they didn't lynch Gaius and Aristarchus. I'm glad they didn't search out Paul and put him to death. But if they really knew what was at stake... if they really knew how dangerous Paul and his companions were to their way of life... they would have killed them.⁶²

But God is sovereign. And I believe he intervenes in this precarious situation. And everyone went home without a fight. The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord (**Job 1:21**).⁶³ The Lord allowed Stephen to be slain (**Acts 7:54–60**). The Lord allowed James to be martyred (**Acts 12:1–3**). But the Lord allows everyone in Ephesus to escape with their lives in **Acts 19**.⁶⁴ God be praised!⁶⁵

Write this down as a third point from our message. Three reasons your gods aren't worthy of your worship:

- 1) They are created things, not the **Creator** (**Acts 19:21–26**)
- 2) They are powerless and require **protection** (**Acts 19:27–34**)
- 3) They inspire fickle and unstable **devotion** (**Acts 19:35–41**)

“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

“Hey, hey, cool it. You know you could go jail for this!”

“O, I’m really sorry. I guess I’ll just go home then.”

Isn't it amazing how fickle this crowd is and how easily their passion is squelched? Here's what I think. I think their passion for Artemis was suddenly overtaken by their passion for self-preservation.

Look I don't know about you, but if someone came in here on Sunday morning and said, **“Hey, hey, you need to stop talking about Jesus. You need to stop singing so loudly about Jesus. You’re going to get in trouble with the city.”** You know what I'd say? **“Turn up the volume. You are not going to coerce me into silence.”**

One of the tell-tale signs of an authentic Christian is perseverance through difficulty.⁶⁶ It's a passion for Jesus that is not fickle or easily squelched! When a person's passion for Jesus trumps their passion for sin and their passion for sex and their passion for self-preservation and their passion for comfort... that's when you know you've got an authentic Christian. Otherwise the gospel gets choked out by the cares of this world or gets scorched because of the shallow soil.

When I look at this passage as a whole, if I could sum it up in one sentence, I would sum it up this way—people who worship gods other than the one true God are foolish! I see this passage as a powerful polemic against paganism and idolatry and false worship. Luke is ostensibly saying, “Don’t worship the silly gods of this world! They’re not worthy of your worship! Worship instead the Creator of the universe who has given his son Jesus Christ as atonement for our sins. He is the one true God who is worthy of your worship! Give yourselves wholly to him!” Well-said, Luke. We receive that.

⁶² Sproul, *Acts*, 335: “Many times, those who dare to preach in such environments pay for it with their lives. That is happening today all over the world. We see every night on television what happens when world religions collide, and the conclusion is that religion divides so we do not want to be associated with that. ‘Jesus is the Prince of peace,’ we say, ‘so we should seek to be at peace with all people.’ We have to remember that our Lord said, ‘Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword’ (Matt. 10:34). The sword Jesus had in mind wasn’t the sword of Islamic jihad. Jesus said, ‘For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law’’ (Matt. 10:35).”

⁶³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 103: “We see in the conclusion, then, that the Christians lived, by the grace of God, to see another day. God sovereignly used the pagan town clerk to spare the lives and bold witness of these believers. Other times, however, riots would take place and Christians would fall to the martyr’s sword. Even so, Christians can take comfort in the surpassing sovereignty of our God. In each circumstance, God works all things together according to the purposes of his will.”

⁶⁴ Sproul, *Acts*, 332: “It is only by the grace of God’s protective providence that the Apostle has survived even this long. Throughout his journeys he has been rescued time and time again by the intervention of God.”

⁶⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 414: “One finds in this episode a theme that will continue to recur in the subsequent narrative of Acts—the innocence of the Christians with respect to the civil law. Paul was never found guilty by any Roman official. On the contrary, even if only implicitly, they pled his case, as with the friendly Asiarchs and the town clerk in this instance.”

⁶⁶ Sproul, *Acts*, 336: “We need Christians today who are sold out, who believe the Christian faith and are committed to the truth of Christ and will say, ‘Great is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God!’ and compromise that with no one.”

But we're not done yet. Here's what I want to do before we're done today. **I want to do some "idol-smashing!" I want to deal with some of the "little 'g' gods" that we idolize in our culture today.**

Remember, if you will, the last thing that the Apostle John writes in his first epistle, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). John wasn't writing to unbelievers. He was writing to believers. Why does he finish the book that way? I don't think it's because the church he was writing to had little statues of gods placed all over their houses. Maybe there was some of that.

I think John knew that the human heart is constantly struggling to make gods out of things that aren't gods. I think he knew how easily we make idols out of created things and worship them instead of worshipping the true God.⁶⁷ I think John knew, just like the Apostle Paul (see 1 Cor 10:14; Col 3:5; etc.), that idolatry is something that we, even as Christians, struggle with and need to eradicate.⁶⁸

So, let's do some idol-smashing. You might say, "**Really, Tony? Is that really necessary? Is that really a problem for us?**" Yes, it is. I'll prove it to you. Write these down. These are "**Four 'good things' that we turn into gods.**"⁶⁹

By the way, Tim Keller once defined an idol as "anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."⁷⁰ It's anything in your life that is so central to your life that you can't have a meaningful life if you lose it.⁷¹ That involves more than just graven images.

So if there is a relationship of yours that is so central to your life that you can't have a meaningful life if you lose it, then you have an idol. If there is an achievement or if there is an accomplishment or if there is a substance that is so central to your life that you can't have a meaningful life if you lose it, then you have an idol. Then you have a god.

Now I could mention probably twenty different idols that are common in our world. I could mention power or influence. I could mention careers. I could mention ideology, especially political ideology. I could mention tradition. I could mention education. But I'll save those for another time. Today I'll just give you four.

Four good things that we turn into gods:

1. Money

That's actually the issue that shows up here in **Acts 19**. Demetrius was much more concerned about money than he was about Artemis. And the idolization of money has been a problem since the very beginning.

Now let's be clear. Money is not intrinsically evil. Everyone hear me on that? In fact, money can be a great blessing. It's nice to have money. You can do a lot of good with money. It's fun to make money. And I would encourage all of you to go out there and make money, and provide well for your family, and give it away generously.

⁶⁷ Sproul, *Acts*, 332–3: "John Calvin tells us in the *Institutes* that the heart of every human being is an idol factory, a *fabricum idolarum*. We are by nature inventors, craftsmen who create for ourselves idols as substitutes for the living God."

⁶⁸ Sproul, *Acts*, 333: "Every human being knows the living God because God has clearly revealed His character to everyone. Yet every person by nature represses that knowledge of the true God and exchanges it for a lie by creating idols as substitutes for the true God (Rom. 1:18–23). That propensity does not end with conversion. That strong drive within us to replace the living God with something more palatable to us remains even in the hearts and minds of the converted. Today we do not fashion idols from stone, but we do fashion idols from ideas."

⁶⁹ What follows is an abbreviated list from Tim Keller and a sermon that he preached on *Acts 19*. See Tim Keller, "The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry," 10-24-17: https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/conference_media/the-grand-demythologizer/. See also Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

⁷⁰ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xix.

⁷¹ Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xx: "A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. An idol has such a controlling position in your heart that you can spend most of your passion and energy, your emotional and financial resources, on it without a second thought. It can be family and children, or career and making money, or achievement and critical acclaim, or saving 'face' and social standing. It can be a romantic relationship, peer approval, competence and skill, secure and comfortable circumstances, your beauty or your brains, a great political or social cause, your morality and virtue, or even success in the Christian ministry."

But when people idolize it... when people can't live without it or without a certain amount of it... when you find yourself compulsively absorbed in spending it or making it or saving it or having it, you've got an idol. When a good thing becomes the ultimate thing, that's when you've got an idol. And money is one of those things that can so easily grip our hearts and steer us away from our savior.

By the way, Artemis eventually became the goddess of money and business. And Ephesus became a major business center. It was the New York City of its day. Artemis was the goddess of fertility, and so people thought if they sacrificed to her their crops would grow and they would be profitable. And so people took a good thing—money, business, wealth—and they mythologized it. And it became Artemis. That's why Keller says that one of our jobs as Christians is to demythologize the idols in our world.

Human reason also is a wonderful thing. The ability to rationalize and think and use science and philosophy to consider the great things of this world is great. But when reason is mythologized and made into an idol you have Athena, the Greek goddess of Reason and the patron goddess of Athens, the intellectual capital of Paul's day.

Beauty likewise is a wonderful thing. Love is a wonderful thing. Romance is a wonderful thing. Sex is a wonderful thing. But when beauty, romance, and sex are mythologized into an idol, then you get Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. And we've got to demythologize those things, so that we can enjoy them and use them for the glory of God.⁷²

Speaking of Aphrodite, here's another "good thing" that we turn into a god:

2. **Romance**

I would say "sex" here. That's certainly an idol for some. But romance or "romantic love" is a little more subtle. And if you've ever fallen in love with someone, it's very, very powerful. Am I right?

And here's where you got to watch yourself. If you look to that other person as the ultimate meaning in your life... if that other person becomes so central to your life that you can't have a meaningful life if you lose her or him, then you have a functional god. And in our country, I've seen more people bow down to that "relationship" idol, the "romance" idol, than just about any other thing. I mean we write songs about romance in our country like, "I can't live if living is without you!" Right?

Here's a third "good thing" that we turn into a god:

3. **Family**

Now this is a tricky one. Stay with me here. I think this is a real problem in evangelical Christianity. And I understand the problem. Because I'm an evangelical! I adore my wife. I love my son. But let me go back to that previous statement—Anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give." I can't even begin to tell you how easy it would be for me to fall into that temptation.

Here's a great thing to remember, all of you out there. Forgive me for being a little bit morose here. One day you are going to have to put your spouse into a coffin. Either your spouse is going to do it for you or you are going to do it for your spouse. Some of us will have to put children into a coffin. Most of us will put our parents in a coffin. If your "messiah," if your "functional savior" is in that coffin, you've got nothing to live for after they're gone.

That image right there should scare all of us about the dangers of idolatry. And besides all that, the worst thing that you can do to your spouse or to your children or to your parents is make them into an idol. That's not fair to them. They will fail you as a god. They can't be your messiah. Parents, don't do this to your children. Don't turn them into an idol. I've said this before, let me say it again, "When you put your family ahead of God, you put them at risk."

You know it's easy to laugh at the Ephesians for their superstitious and self-serving idolatry. Isn't it? But when you start to examine your own life and your own man-made idols, it's not so funny anymore.

Here's a final "good thing" that we turn into a god:

4. **Morality**

⁷² Paraphrased from Tim Keller, "The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry," 10-24-17.

You know many Christians quietly assume that God loves them because of how committed they are—because they attend church, take notes, pray regularly, have daily devotions, avoid obvious sins, and try to live morally. Deep down, they believe that this level of dedication obligates God to bless them and answer their prayers.⁷³

But do you know what that is? That's garden variety legalism! That's garden variety moralism! It takes morality, which is a great thing, and turns it into an idol. It takes holiness, which is a great thing, and turns it into an idol.⁷⁴ Trusting in morality instead of trusting in Christ for our salvation (and sanctification!) is hopelessly flawed. Watch out for that, Christians!

Here's an important distinction: We live moral lives because Christ saved us. We are pressed by the Holy Spirit inside of us to live moral and pleasing lives before the Lord, because we are new creatures in Christ Jesus. We don't live moral lives in order to be saved. That is a perversion of the gospel.

Now here's the thing. I'll close with this. Idolatry in the OT was a capital offense (Deut 17:2–5). Did you know that? Did anyone feel convicted about that list of four idols that I just gave you? If you are guilty of idolatry in any of those categories, you deserve death.

But that's not really that shocking a statement for the Christian. We know we deserve death. We know that we deserve eternal death. We know that our moralism doesn't save us. Christ saves us.

Because in our sinfulness and in the midst of our idolatrous behavior, Christ offers us the free gift of salvation, not based on what we have done, but what he has done.

Do you know Jesus Christ as your Savior? Have you received the free gift of salvation that he gives? If not, then you should remedy that today.

If you do know him, if you do love him, if you have trusted him as your Savior, then let me exhort you, "Thou shalt have no other gods before him" (Exod 20:3, KJV). Or in the words of the Apostle John, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

⁷³ Paraphrased from Tim Keller, "The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry," 10-24-17.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

