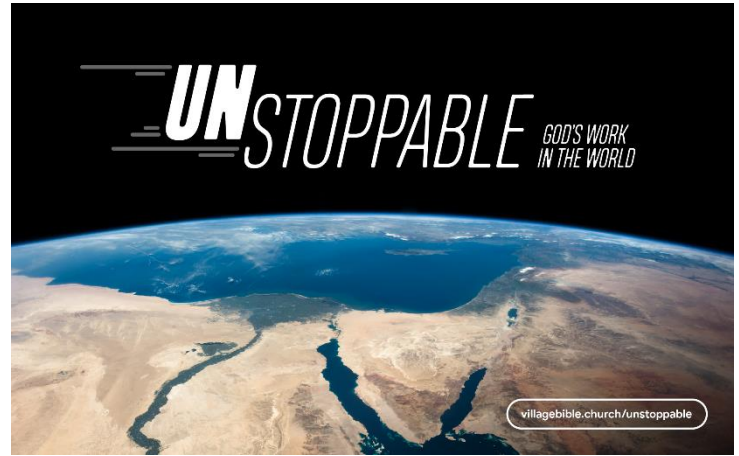




UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World, Part 13

My Greatest Fear – Acts 19:1–20

Tim Badal | December 9, 2018



Take God's Word in your hands and turn to Acts 19. We're in a series called "Unstoppable," looking at the second half of the book of Acts. Last year we did the first half of Acts under the heading "Unfinished." Now we're reading about the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, who along with others spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the known world.

In his first two journeys, Paul saw the gospel make some impressive inroads in different parts of the Roman Empire. Now in Acts 19, we'll see him embark on his third missionary journey. He made four journeys altogether, and the last journey ended with him as a prisoner and eventual martyr in Rome. But that allowed him to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the central city of Rome, which revolutionized the entire empire and impacted us as well. It's amazing how God blessed so many through these few people who were faithful to be all in for the gospel.

In Acts 19, after a short vignette on a man named Apollos, we'll be picking up the story of Paul again. Apollos was impacted by the ministry of a husband and wife team—Aquila and Priscilla—from whom he learned how to more powerfully and accurately proclaim the gospel to others. Paul had been serving in Galatia and Phrygia, which is modern-day Turkey, going from city to city in that region. Looking again at our map, we will find Paul now in Ephesus on the shore of the Aegean Sea.

Ephesus was not a backwards community but was rather a metropolis of about 300,000 people. It was the site of the temple of the goddess Diana, also known as Artemis. People came from far and wide to see this temple—one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. But along with its fame came all the temple prostitution and other forms of pagan worship. This meant Ephesus was much like Corinth, filled with debauchery and depravity, thus much in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. While Ephesus as a city no longer exists, its ruins are still there. There was an open theater that sat over 20,000 people—the same size as the United Center in Chicago—where people watched plays and other forms of entertainment.



In spite of the culture, the church in Ephesus had a huge and lasting impact on Christian history. Through the ministry of Paul that we'll read about today, people came to know Christ as their Savior. The church they formed was then pastored by Timothy, one of Paul's associates and disciples. Later Paul wrote three letters to the Ephesian Christians: the book of Ephesians and two letters to Timothy personally. We also know Jesus included the church in Ephesus as part of His "letters to the seven churches" recorded in the first chapters of Revelation. The story of the Ephesian Christians is important to us because it shows how God can raise up

believers even in a community that is as pagan and lost as the city of Ephesus was. These believers changed the course not only of their community, but all of human life throughout the rest of history.

Our passage in Acts 19 today is lengthy, but I'm going to try to draw it together around one theme. We'll be reading Acts 19:1–20. Here's what Luke tells us about Paul's time in Ephesus:

And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ² 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." ³ And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ 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." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. ⁷ There were about twelve men in all.

⁸ And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

¹¹ And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, ¹² so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. ¹³ Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus, whom Paul proclaims." ¹⁴ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. ¹⁵ But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" ¹⁶ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 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. ¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. ¹⁹ And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. ²⁰ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

In essence we have three stories we're going to talk about today.

- First, there's the episode of the disciples who thought they were followers of God but in fact were not. We'll learn how they come to know Jesus and what impact that has on us today.
- Second, we'll see the story of the sons of Sceva who witnessed Paul's miracles and tried to copy him, but they found out that didn't work.
- Finally, we'll see the impact on the lives of people who said goodbye to their former ways of life. The same should be true of us when we turn ourselves and everything we are to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Do you have some sort of fear, maybe spiders or something else? We all have fears. I have had a fear since I was a young boy that I have never been able to fully shake. It drives me nuts, because it seems to be something that's all in my head. It's the fear of heights. As long as I can remember, I have been fearful of being any higher than six feet, four inches. Any time I get above that, I get this queasy feeling inside. I feel like that when I'm on a ladder, on a house roof, in an airplane, and especially when I'm on a roller coaster. It just doesn't seem safe to hurl your body upside down at high rates of speed. I have missed out on incredible opportunities of enjoyment because of this fear because I opted out so often.

Now, about 20 years ago I got tired of this. I said, "I'm a grown man and I shouldn't be afraid of heights." I started forcing myself into situations where I had to face my fear. For a while, it was ugly. In fact, one time I was on a roof working with some guys here at the church and I froze. I couldn't move. It was pathetic. They had to walk me off the roof, speaking sweet nothings in my ear to get me thinking about something else. I thought, "I'm done. I'm never going to do that again." Then I'd force myself again and again, because I wanted to conquer this fear. I want to do everything in my power so that at some point I'll be able to say, "I've overcome this fear and I can live in freedom."

I want you to know that while the fear of heights is something that at times has crippled me, I have an even greater fear that impacts my calling as a pastor. I don't know if I've ever shared this with you before in my 15 years of ministry, but one of my greatest fears—and one of the reasons why I do what I do—is the fear that there are people in my church and other churches who say they're followers of Christ, but who on the day of judgment will find out they never were part of the family of God.

That concerns me, and quite frankly, it should concern every one of us. Each of us should say, "I want to know without a shadow of a doubt that when I stand before God, I will not stand in fear and trepidation. Instead, I will stand in confidence, knowing my

God will usher me into His Kingdom, into His glory for all eternity." Yet I've come to realize that in our world—especially here in America—there is a culture that allows us to say we're in Christ, that we're followers of His, we're Christians, but in reality we are not.

A recent study totally explains this for us. People were asked, "Are you a follower of the teachings of Christ?" Essentially they were asked, "Are you a Christian?" Forty-three percent of Americans answered, "Yes." Now, that's quite an amazing number, because if 43% of Americans agreed on anything, America would be a very different place. This study found that 43% of those asked affirmed they were followers of Christ—and yet, as a pastor, I have to ask if this is really true. Although people can say they follow Christ, are they actually doing that?

I want to be careful, because I could preach in such a way as to cause everyone to doubt their salvation, and that's not my intent. In fact, my desire is to bring confidence and assurance to those who are truly in Christ, which I want to believe the vast majority of us are, based on what I've seen in your lives. I've seen how God has moved through you and I want to give you confidence that you're in the faith.

The Bible tells us there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38–39). We need to believe and hold on to that. In fact, our Statement of Faith at Village Bible Church includes this in its reference to perseverance, that we as followers of Christ will endure to the end. A promise to all true believers is that those whom God has accepted in Christ and who have been sanctified by His Spirit will never fall away from the state of grace but will persevere to the end of their earthly lives. The Statement goes on to say that believers will fall into sin through neglect and temptation, thereby grieving the Spirit, bringing reproach on the cause of Christ, even coming under the Lord's discipline. Nevertheless, God's promise is sure, that if God has begun a good work of salvation in you, He is faithful to see it to completion (Philippians 1:6). We can believe that, affirm that, holding tightly to that as an anchor for our souls.

But there's also a modifier in that Statement of Faith that is so important for us, which raises the question: are you a true believer in Jesus Christ? It will be such a travesty if you invested all your time and energy going through religious activities, being a part of this church and sitting under biblical teaching, being part of a group of people who love Jesus, only to find out you were never in the family of God to begin with. What a heartbreaking place that would be.

A great fear of mine as a pastor is that I would not be bold enough to ask if you are a true follower of Jesus Christ? Even if in that confrontation I offend you a little bit, I'd rather offend you now than have you offend God at the judgment seat of Christ. I see in our passage today a group of 12 men in Ephesus who thought they were saved, only to find out through one question Paul asked that they didn't have salvation in the first place.

If you ask me why I would do this, I do it because the Bible does. In fact, Jesus Himself said this in Matthew 7:22–23, in the Sermon on the Mount: "There will be many"—not a few, not some, but many—"on that day"—what day? The day of judgment. Many will stand before Him and say, "Lord, Lord, didn't we do this, didn't we do that?" All sorts of spiritual and religious resumes will come flowing out of their mouths. How will Jesus respond? "Depart from Me. I never knew you."

It seems as if this will come as a shock to those people. Why would that happen? Because the human heart is really good at deceiving itself. We can deceive ourselves, we can deceive others, but we cannot deceive God. He knows the thoughts and inclinations of the heart and will judge the living and the dead on that day (Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5). As your pastor, I am compelled to make sure each one of us are in the family of God. You shouldn't leave this place without that assurance.

Returning to our text, we see that Paul had spent some time in Ephesus during this visit. He had been there before when he had seen a positive response to his preaching of the gospel (Acts 18). When they asked him to stay, he told them he was headed to Jerusalem to fulfill a commitment he had made to God. But he said, "If the Lord wills, I will return." So we can conclude that Paul was in Ephesus again because that was the will of God.

When Paul came to Ephesus, he found some disciples, which in the Greek means they were learners. They were students of someone—in this case, students of John the Baptist. It seemed that Paul initially had Christian fellowship with these men. But something caused Paul to stop in his tracks and say, "Wait a minute. I thought we were all on the same page, but I'm not sure of that."

In order to alleviate this fear, we must not mistake our faith as genuine.

In this passage we learn that if we want to alleviate the fear of not being in right standing before God, we need to do some things. First, we must not mistake our faith as genuine when it is not. These 12 men thought they were right with God—but they found out they were not. We're not exactly sure how they figured this out, but I'm going to suggest three things Paul may have seen in their lives—things that will also allow us to assess our own position before God.

This involves doing a self-assessment of our doctrine.

First, Paul saw something wrong in their doctrine—in what they believed. Perhaps when they were talking together, one of these 12 disciples of John said something about God or Jesus that wasn't true. Paul would have responded that a true believer in Jesus, a true student of God's Word, would not believe this about Him. In fact, this wrong belief might have meant they were not actually followers of Christ.

In 2 Peter 2:1, Peter calls false doctrine damnable heresies. In other words, there are wrong beliefs that will in essence send you to hell. These heretical beliefs are things that are so foundational to the truth of Jesus Christ that if you accept them, you start eroding the gospel until it becomes something completely different.

Some of these heretical doctrines are with us today. Jesus has clearly said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6). This means every other world religion is so defective that it cannot restore a person's relationship with God. This means we need go out and send others out to all parts of the world, witnessing to them the good news of Jesus Christ. There are vast numbers of people who believe in those defective and destructive religions, keeping them from a right relationship with God. One day, they will be damned to an eternity apart from Him.

It's not just when we believe this truth about Christ that we're okay. There are groups who believe in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures who are still off in their doctrine to the extent that it keeps people out of His Kingdom. Mormons accept the Bible. Jehovah's Witnesses accept the Bible. Christian Scientists use the Bible. These are people who have beliefs that can appear quite similar to ours, but they add such warped teachings about the Person and work of Jesus Christ that the evangelical church has realized they are not with us. We often use the word "cult" in reference to these organizations, not to be unkind and malign them as individuals. But if their doctrine is keeping people from the Kingdom of God, then we have to call it out for what it is. The New Testament called those teachings "false teachings." There are beliefs that will cause us to forfeit a right relationship with God, and it could have been false doctrine that Paul saw in those men.

This involves doing a self-assessment of our demeanor.

Or maybe Paul saw something in their demeanor that caused him to doubt their right standing with God. Maybe they were doing something that was unchristian.

Have you ever hung around a person who, when in the middle of a conversation about Jesus, said or did something altogether unchristian? You think, "We were just talking about Jesus, then you started cursing someone in an unchristian way." When this happens, we have to decide which part of the conversation gives more authentic evidence of that person's right standing with God. "Is he/she a child of God or not?" But in that moment, did that person seem bothered about it? Did they stop and say, "Whoa, I was out of line saying that. Will you forgive me? And I need to ask God for forgiveness"? Or was their attitude, "I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, however I want"?

Maybe this was what Paul had to decide when he was interacting with these men. They might have done something sinful, despite what they were claiming to believe. Does that mean that Christians never sin? No. Does our demeanor announce to the world that we're followers of Christ, or does our demeanor reveal that we are as worldly as anyone else? You might ask, "Does Jesus really require that my demeanor be different?" Yes, He does. He says, "If you love Me, you will obey My teachings, My commands" (John 14:15). When a child of God doesn't obey the commands of God, it should bring them to a place of great conviction. This conviction should then move them to action—seeking repentance and forgiveness.

If you claim to be a Christian, but your life doesn't reflect that, you should be altogether uneasy about your eternal place in the family of God. I feel okay in saying that, not because I think you're not saved, but because the Bible says if you're not following the commands of God, something is inherently wrong. If you're not following His commands, are you doing the things a Christian does just to get right with God?

I had a person who was visibly agitated after the first service today. [In second service I get to correct the things I do wrong in the first service.] This young lady was concerned about the fact that we all still sin. Here's how I responded to her: As a husband, it is my desire to please, honor and love my wife. Will I always do that? I know it's hard to believe, but I don't always do that. [By the way, Amanda doesn't always do this for me, so we're even here.] When I wrong Amanda, my response can either be, "Who cares?" or I can respond, "I'm sorry, Amanda. Please forgive me. I'm going to try to avoid this in the future."

If you respond to God in the first way, that is, you don't really care when you sin—thinking you have Christian fire insurance anyway—I want you to know your "insurance" might not be valid. You may say you're in love with someone when you're really not, because the proof of that love is missing. It's not in you. Or you respond as a person who is flawed and broken. As our Doctrinal Statement says, you're going to sin, yet you want and seek forgiveness, to make things right when that happens. You don't desire to sin in this way again and again and again. That's the difference. We're all going to sin—it's our response to that sin that matters.

This involves doing a self-assessment of our dedication.

The problem in Acts could have been these men's doctrine or demeanor, or it could have been their dedication. They might have talked about loving God and wanting to follow Him. They might have spoken of the teachings of John, but their mouths might have been speaking more than what their feet and hands were doing in practice.

Some of us are more dedicated in our profession of faith than in our actual obedience to Jesus. The text tells us these men believed. That can throw us off, because we equate belief with salvation—that if we believe in God, we are saved. But we need to realize the Bible uses the word "belief" in the broad sense. For example, we see in James that the demons believed. And yes, demons definitely believe some very true things about God. They know they were created by Him. They know He is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. They know His glory—they had experienced it before they fell from heaven. They know He is a powerful God and that in the end, He will win. But we won't see them in His presence in eternity.

How can someone believe and still not be part of God's family? Because not all belief is equal. Some of you may be sitting here with all the right beliefs, thinking that because of this you're in good standing with God, but just as the demons would be wrong to think this, so are you. This should grip our hearts and cause us to ask, "Am I truly a follower of Jesus Christ?" In the process of answering this question, we need to be careful of some counterfeits. These are some that come out of our text today.

In order to alleviate fear, we must not make up our own requirements.

One thing we can do is make up our own requirements for faith.

I need to confess something to you. When my family plays Monopoly—both in my family growing up and in my current family—we make up rules as we go along. Does anyone else do this when they play Monopoly? Rather than reading the instructions, we decide to play it our way. I don't know about your Monopoly game, but I can't even find the instructions anymore.

It's one thing to make up rules to a dumb board game, but it's altogether different to make up rules regarding our faith—but that's what we do. We create certain litmus tests to decide whether we're in with God or not, but it never dawns on us to go to the Creator of salvation Himself. We don't realize it doesn't matter what we think; it matters what God thinks salvation is and what is required.

What are some of these counterfeits?

Beware of this counterfeit: close but no cigar faith.

As Paul was interacting with the 12 men in Ephesus, he found out they were students of John the Baptist. They were not very good students, however, and here's how we know that. When Paul asked them, "What spirit were you baptized in?" they answered, "What spirit?" That's a bad answer. If they were truly followers of John's teaching, John spoke very specifically about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He said, "I baptize you in water, but there is One coming Who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 3:11). They do not know anything about it. That's a problem. Maybe as students they missed that day when John was speaking about that. Throughout the Old Testament, Scripture talks about the Spirit of Almighty God moving in the hearts of people. It says the Spirit of God would take the stony hearts of men and replace them with fleshly hearts that would cause them to act differently from the way they acted before (Ezekiel 36:26). The Spirit is mentioned from Genesis to Malachi. He is alive and well throughout the Scriptures, yet these guys said they'd never heard of Him. This tells me these weren't the students they professed to be. They had just enough information to make them dangerous; enough belief to make others think they were truly followers of God. But these men didn't know about Jesus or the Holy Spirit and as a result, they weren't really aware of the gospel. They were lost, even though

they didn't feel like it. Nowhere in this text prior to the gospel being proclaimed does it say they felt they needed to hear more about the gospel.

This makes them different from Apollos. Scholars are clear that Apollos studied and knew the Scriptures—he just wasn't aware of some of the current activities of the Spirit, the church and the fact that Gentiles had now been included in the family of God. That was different from not knowing that the Spirit of God would change people and make them more like Christ. Be careful not to be close but not in. Be very careful of counterfeits, because people can have just enough reasons to think they're saved but still be lost. We know that anyone who trusts Christ as Savior is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Beware of this counterfeit: cultural faith.

Moving to Acts 19:8–10, we see that Paul went into the synagogue just as he always did, where he *“spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God.”* But again, the Jews were stubborn and continued in their disbelief, speaking against the Way of Christianity in front of the congregation. Paul responded by getting up, leaving, taking the 12 new disciples with him and moving to the hall of Tyrannus.

You might think, “Wait a minute. These are God-fearing Jews who knew the Scriptures. They were worshipping regularly in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. They served God and went through all the motions their religion required of them.” But now when Paul preached Christ to them, they responded with, “Get that garbage out of here.” You might wonder how God-fearing people could hate Jesus so much.

Churches all across our country—in fact, all over the world— have tons of people entering them, not because they want a relationship with Jesus that changes them from the inside out, but they are there to cross this duty off the list. They do these things because their mom and dad did, their grandparents did, or that's what their culture does. These cultural religions cause people to act out of obligation or as part of their tradition. But when someone tells them how Jesus can change them, they won't listen.

I heard this from one of our members at Thanksgiving who had told his family about how God was changing his life. His culturally religious family wanted nothing to do with what he was saying. This person was a newer believer and wondered why the family wouldn't want to hear about the Jesus he worshiped.

When you're only part of cultural Christianity, it's something just to mark off your list. Let me be honest—some of you may be here because of cultural pressures. Maybe you're here because your parents want you here. Maybe you're here because your spouse wants you here. Maybe you're here because you know at some point during Christmas your mom is going to ask, “Now, where are you going to church?” You want to make sure you have that Village Bible Church bulletin to show her. “Yeah, I'm attending church. It's a good church.” But you're not here for anything more than to check it off the list.

In the eyes of God, that kind of faith is no good. He doesn't want your body in worship—He wants your heart given to Him.

Beware of this counterfeit: copycat faith.

This takes us to a crazy story in Acts 19:11. Paul was impacting lives in the city of Ephesus, where the worship of pagan gods like those in Greek and Roman mythology was huge. God validated and authenticated Paul's ministry by allowing some extraordinary events to take place. We read of handkerchiefs that Paul touched—literally, his sweat rags. Imagine that I've worked myself into a lather, I wipe my face and set the cloth down on the table. You guys then fight to touch it, thinking that might heal you from a disease. It sounds incredible, but this is what happened back then. What an awesome God, Who can use the mundane things of a man like Paul to change lives.

God used that to validate what Paul was teaching, so when he spoke people wanted to listen. But instead of listening, the brothers of the Sceva family decided they wanted to do what Paul was doing. Their primary motive was probably money. Isn't it usually money that gets us into trouble?

So these guys figured what they needed to do was find some people who had demons to exorcise. Then by mentioning Paul's name, they believed they could accomplish the same things Paul did. They found a demon-possessed person and said, “In the name of Jesus Who Paul preaches, come out!” The demon responded, “Excuse me? I know Paul and I know Jesus, but I don't know you. What's more, I'm offended that you would even try to call me out this way,” so he beat them to a bloody pulp. They ran out of the house naked, which caused the people to be full of fear.

First, they were afraid of the demon's powers. We need to be careful of this as well when dealing with the occult. This is not fun and games. The dark powers of Satan and dark magic that surrounds it are things we should never play with. It's dangerous and can wreak havoc in your life.

I also want you to see something that's closer to what we're a part of. The sons of Sceva decided to copy Paul, and in their copycat faith they thought that if they did what Paul did, they would gain the same results. They took the form of something that was real and copied it, thinking it was the form that had the power. They used his words, thinking demons would run. But they're the ones who ended up running.

Here's where we need to be careful. Some of us may be copying the faith of someone else, thinking the form is enough to save us. It is not. Teenagers, you cannot copy your parents' faith and think you can make it to heaven on their coattails. Salvation doesn't come by osmosis, by simply being close to someone else. Salvation only comes by personally receiving the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary.

In fact, Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 11:1 that we should imitate him as he imitated Christ. Don't just follow someone thinking they can give you some kind of shortcut to salvation. It doesn't work that way. These guys learned the hard way that there was no power in imitating a form. Rather, it requires the power of God working in the hearts of individuals that allows them to do extraordinary things. Be careful of copycat faith.

Beware of this counterfeit: compartmentalized faith.

Finally, we see in this text a compartmentalized faith beginning in verse 18. As a result of what happened to the sons of Sceva, people became enthralled with Paul's power through the work of the Holy Spirit. They realized they too needed to become right with God. They saw how the faith of the sons of Sceva fell apart when it was tested and responded by getting rid of the things in their lives that had been part of their former worship, *"confessing and divulging their practices."*

These practices were part of the black magic they had used, but they realized if they were going to follow Jesus, they needed to get rid of what was part of their old way of life. They brought what amounted to 50,000 pieces of silver. That's a huge amount of money. But they knew if they were going to be true followers of Jesus, they couldn't keep those things that were part of their past sinful practices.

Only when we give Jesus our total selves will we experience true salvation. But so often we are cut to the heart and tell Jesus we give Him our lives—yet we privately leave some things in our closets. We give Him our Sundays, our schedules, but not all of our money. We give Him our marriages, but not our kids. We give Him our jobs, but not our recreation. In other words, we compartmentalize our faith. We say our faith applies to this, but not to that. Be very careful. Salvation involves all of us, not part of us.

If there's part of you today that you're holding back—and it's only between you and God because we hide things well—you may not have salvation at all. These are counterfeits that will keep you from experiencing real salvation in Him.

In order to alleviate this fear, we must not miss these lessons.

So what do we do? There are some lessons we need to learn from our text today.

These lessons include checking our faith.

Turn to 2 Corinthians 13:5 for a moment. If you're uncomfortable with what I'm preaching, here's a Bible verse to help you realize it's not just me saying these things. The same Paul who was preaching in Ephesus wrote these words: *"Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"*

Here's Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of that verse in *The Message*: *"Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it."* What evidence would you give a jury of your peers to demonstrate that you are a bona fide follower of Jesus Christ? Not hearsay.

These lessons include challenging others.

The second lesson we shouldn't miss is that we need to challenge one another. We have to imagine those 12 men were uncomfortable when Paul challenged their salvation. I'm sure in that small group gathering, there was some trouble. I'm sure Paul didn't want to ask the question and that the guys didn't like hearing it. But after everything was said and done, do you think the 12 men were offended that Paul had asked them the hard question? Probably, but they came to know Jesus and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

As we're part of worshiping and fellowshiping together, we need to challenge one another. We need to ask each other, "Are you truly in the faith?" We should never do it to be demoralizing, judgmental or harsh. We should speak in love and also be ready for this question to be asked of us. We need

to challenge one another to be sure we are all in, especially if our doctrine and/or demeanor indicate otherwise.

I'd rather offend people in my small group or church now than have to watch on the day of judgment and see them standing stunned before God because they weren't really in His family when they thought they were. How much happier will they be knowing that I was right to confront them now and what that will mean for eternity.

We need to be careful with this, but it's good to make sure all of us are in the faith. The Bible says to "spur one another on" (Hebrews 10:24). Another Scripture says we are to be iron sharpening iron (Proverbs 27:17). At times when iron is sharpening iron, what takes place? Sparks fly and that's okay. But love should cover that harshness by our asking hard questions.

These lessons include cutting ties with sin.

We need to do what the men and women in our passage today did—they got rid of things in their lives that interfered with their faith. These may have been things they loved and were part of their pattern of living. These were probably valuable items.

As people who profess to be Christians, what things from our former way of life before coming to Christ are we still holding on to? Some of us need to get rid of some cell phones because they're causing us to sin. For others, it may be a computer. Still others may have a relationship that needs to go. The Bible says bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:33). Keeping a relationship is not worth losing your soul. Sometimes it's our possessions, or maybe this year's Christmas list. We're more concerned about that than we are about pursuing Christ-likeness.

There are things we need to get rid of. Each of us needs to stand before God and say, "God, what things are holding me from a true and vibrant walk with You? I want to be ready to get rid of them, even as those people in Acts burned their books for the glory of God and for the good of His people."

These lessons include changing our world.

When we get serious about our faith, when we truly believe Christ, when we are filled by the Spirit and changed by Him, one result will happen: we'll change our world. Look again at Acts 19:10: *"This continued for two years."* Paul stayed in Ephesus longer than any



other place on his missionary journeys. He stayed there "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

Look one more time at our map. When Luke says "all the residents of Asia," look at how large that area is. All of this region had heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, both the Jews and the Greeks.

If we got serious about our walk with God, how awesome would it be to be able to say, "Here in the Fox Valley area...here in the state of Illinois... because of our work, all the residents have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ"?

Notice what we see in verse 20: *"So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily."* When you and I get serious about our walk with Christ and when we live like

saved people are supposed to live, the word we proclaim will have an impact on the world around us.

One of the reasons we don't see this kind of impact today is that we aren't living what we're preaching. Quite frankly, the people who are listening to us are confused when we say one thing and then we do something else. They see us go to church, but then they hear us talk like everyone else at the office. We say we're supposed to run from sin, but then we're watching the same TV shows they do. They don't know whether to believe our talk or our walk. But when we get serious—when we start burning those things and cutting ties with those people or things that hinder us—we will be amazed.

When I'm in a right standing with God, filled with His Spirit and living in fellowship with Him, I'm always blown away by the awesome opportunities God brings me. God isn't going to give you an opportunity when you're not ready for it. Why would He waste that opportunity? If you're not positioning yourself where you're supposed to be in obedience to Him, God won't send you to share the gospel with anyone else. That's bad advertising. That's a bad marketing strategy. If you're not seeing opportunities for witnessing, it could be because you're not positioned in holiness and right standing with God. He's not going to put you on His team until you prove you want to be there in the first place. So there's much we can learn from these verses.

Do I realize this kind of confrontation will challenge people? I sure do. It might even offend some. But as a pastor, I am compelled to ask these questions, because my greatest fear is that some will sit under this teaching year after year, Sunday after Sunday, thinking they have eternal life. Each one of us must receive the salvation that Jesus Christ offers through the blood He shed for us on the cross of Calvary—through grace alone and by faith alone. If we think we can do this by ourselves, or if we think we can get into heaven by copying someone else's faith, or if we think it can be part of our culture but not a part of our hearts, then we will be gravely mistaken on the day of judgment. I love you too much not to share that good word with you.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Note: This transcription has been provided by Sermon Transcribers (www.sermontranscribers.net).