

UNSTOPPABLE

GOD'S WORK
IN THE WORLD

Halfway Christians

Lesson 12

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DEVOTIONAL

When Paul came to Ephesus, he found men and women who had been told about Jesus, at least to the extent of the baptism of John. He obviously thought they were Christians when he first met them. But, as he watched them, he observed that something was missing, and I am sure there is puzzlement in his voice when finally he says to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” This question indicates that the normal Christian pattern is that the Spirit is given immediately upon belief in Jesus Christ. There is no suggestion here that the Spirit of God is given a long period after belief in Christ.

There are many people who believe in Jesus and yet who today do not evidence much sign of the work of the Holy Spirit. There are many churches in our land today where, as I am privileged sometimes to speak in them, I want to say to the people, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? There is no sign of it.”

The Holy Spirit is given upon belief in the Lord Jesus, but that does not stop with one act of believing. We are to keep on believing in the Lord Jesus and thus to manifest his power and vitality in our lives. It is that continual act of believing which releases the freshness of the Spirit in our lives. Paul says to the Colossians, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him...” (Colossians 2:6 RSV). As you received him by an act of believing, keep on believing, walk in him, live in him, so that you might demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit. So, what is wrong if there is no evidence of the working of the Spirit? None of the joy, none of the grace, none of the power? It is because we are not believing in Him. We believed in Him once, but that believing has ceased. There is now no sense of expectancy, no fresh anticipation of His working in our lives today.

Are there signs of the Spirit of God in your life? Are His presence, His power, His working, the freshness, the vitality, the enthusiasm, the excitement of the Spirit visible in your Christian life? If not, you have ceased believing in Jesus. There must be this expectation of His working, for He makes Himself available to us continually, moment by moment, to fulfill every demand life makes upon us, as we expect Him to do so. That note of expectancy is the evidence, or the sign, of faith which marks the difference between the sterility, the deadness, and the dullness of religiosity without the Spirit, and the fullness, the freshness, and the vigor and power of a Spirit-filled life. So this question, addressed to these halfway Christians of long ago Ephesus, still has meaning for us today, as we understand the need for a continual act of faith in the Lord Jesus.

Have we settled for being “halfway Christians,” absent evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit? What is the key to releasing the freshness and vitality of His power in and through us? Is our daily walk characterized by believing in God's Word and in His indwelling presence?¹

¹Devotional by Ray Stedman <https://www.raystedman.org/daily-devotions/acts-13to28/halfway-christians> © 2014 Ray Stedman Ministries.

OPEN IT

1. What project have you started in the past and to this day has been left unfinished? What keeps you from completing it?

READ IT

Acts 19:1-22

EXPLORE IT

2. What did Paul ask the disciples in Ephesus about?
3. How did the evil spirit respond to the sons of Sceva?
4. What did those who practiced magic arts do in response?
5. Where did Paul feel compelled to go?

APPLY IT

THE ORIGINAL “SIN CITY”

Ephesus was a deceptively beautiful metropolis. The magnificent temple to the fertility goddess Artemis—one of the seven wonders of the first-century world—dominated its skyline and religious, social, and economic life. No sensual pleasure was denied. It was a world financial center. Dreams of material success and affluence captivated the minds and consumed the energies of the people. All the happiness money could buy was at their fingertips. Life for the Ephesians should have been “the good life.”²

²Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4136-4141). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

6. Compare Ephesus with any major American city today. What similarities are there? Do these similarities surprise you?

But when the early Christians looked at Ephesus, they saw something very different. They saw a culture of fear scarcely veiled by the architectural, artistic, and sensual beauty on display. Christ's followers saw a half-million souls trapped in a devil-dominated world of necromancy, occultism, witchcraft, and useless worship of a lifeless, powerless goddess.³

7. The city of Ephesus was infatuated with dark magic and the occult. What societal sins seem to be most prevalent in our day?

8. It could be easy for Christians today to see the debauchery and sin abounding around us and throw in the towel. Instead of giving up, what tangible things can Christians and churches do to help people lost in such sin?

NOT SO FAST!! (1-7)

As Luke describes Paul's entrance into Ephesus we are told "he found some disciples." One commentator describes these disciples in the following way:

What Paul found when he returned was a group of what Barclay called incomplete Christians. The text tells us simply that these individuals were "disciples." Some have concluded, based on their baptism "into John's baptism," that they were related to Apollos, but the similarities are superficial at best. We cannot assume that this was the case. Whereas Apollos, it appears, was a disciple of Jesus—though in need of some clarification—these were disciples only of John the Baptist. In fact, historical evidence points to the existence of such sects even into the second century.

As noted, Barclay refers to these men as "incomplete Christians." Some might refer to them as "nominal Christians" or perhaps even "unsaved Christians." I am not entirely comfortable with any of these terms. While I understand the labels, a Christian is someone who has been completely saved by Christ. In the same way that "reborn Christian" is a redundant term (all Christians are reborn), "incomplete" or "nominal Christian" is contradictory.

What we have here, it seems, is a group of confused, unbelieving disciples. The Greek word translated "disciple" simply means "learner," and does not in itself indicate saving faith. In fact, John describes a group of "disciples" who turned back entirely from following Jesus (John 6:66). They were "disciples" but not believers. It seems to be the same here. These men had learned but had not learned enough.⁴

³ibid

⁴ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/inadequate-belief/>

9. Read Mark 1:4–8 regarding the ministry of John the Baptist. What things might have made these twelve men from Ephesus believe that they were true followers?

According to Mark's account, what were they missing and why would this cause their ministry to be lacking?

The disciples of John at first had some external form of religion, but until Paul told them about the gospel, they had not been changed truly and internally. But praise God, He changes all sorts of people—from the hedonists to the religious types.⁵

10. In what ways do people today wrongly assume the veracity of their faith?

When Paul first met them, he assumed that they were believers, but noticed that they gave no evidence in their bearing or behaviour of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So he asked them his two leading questions: whether they had received the Spirit when they believed, and into what they had been baptized.⁶

11. Why was it necessary for Paul to ask these two spiritual questions in verses 3-4?

⁵ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 6282-6284). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Stott, John. *The Message of Acts (The Bible Speaks Today Series)* (Kindle Locations 5545-5547). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

It no doubt took time for Paul to realize that the lifestyle of these men did not match their profession. We are not told exactly what it was that led Paul to ask this question, but clearly he was “probing to find out if they really believed, in the evangelical sense.”⁷

12. When is it right if ever to question another’s profession of faith? If so, what criteria should we use to assess another’s faith?

13. In light of the mistaken identity of these so called Christians in Acts 19, what reasons would you give to someone to prove that your Christianity is real and true?

IT’S SHOW TIME AT THE TYRANNUS!!

The hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), a public lecture hall or auditorium that Paul rented for two years, represented a significant addition to the apostle’s evangelistic strategy. The word translated “hall” is one from which “school” is derived, but it was more than a school. It was a public auditorium, one of many in cities of this period, in which specialist scholars would lecture on behalf of a certain clientele. We are given no information whatsoever as to who Tyrannus was or what subjects he lectured on, but he was evidently willing to rent the hall whenever it was not being used for his own purposes. Tyrannus’s own lectures would invariably occur early in the morning, beginning at dawn and ending around 11 a.m.⁸

14. Paul used a lecture hall to further his preaching about Christ. What might his ministry have looked like in our times? Where might we have opportunity to publicly share the gospel with many people?

Luke employs a specific word to describe what Paul did in the hall of Tyrannus—*dialogomenos*. The word is rendered “reasoning” (twice) in the ESV (Acts 19:8, 9). Paul did this both in the synagogue upon arrival at Ephesus (for about three months) and the hall of Tyrannus (for two years).... He would go to the hall “daily” (Acts 19:9) to debate with whoever would be interested....There is a need for today’s church to engage the culture in this way. We should seek out opportunities for debating the merit of Christianity’s truth claims in lecture halls and college campuses, for example.⁹

⁷Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/inadequate-belief/>

⁸Thomas, Derek W. H. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (pp. 542–543). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

⁹ *Ibid.*

- 15. Paul debated all who denied that Jesus was the Christ. How can such an approach (debating others) serve to advance the gospel? What gifts or skills are necessary to do this well? What caution must we take when employing such a tactic?**

HEAVENLY HANKIES

In the witchy atmosphere of Ephesus, God worked in mysterious ways. Paul's healing ministry took a bizarre twist: Handkerchiefs (the Greek word means "sweat rags") and aprons worn by Paul in his tentmaking work were taken to sick and mentally ill people and they got well! But keep the story straight: God did the miracles, not Paul. The healing power was in God, not sweat-soaked rags Paul wore around his head or goat-oil-stained aprons he wiped his hands on. Paul's dirty laundry was a visual aid to help people make the leap into faith in God. Some people need visual aids. Healing people who needed to touch Paul's cast-off clothing before they could believe (even though, in reality, such things are unnecessary) was a loving God's gracious way of meeting people where they were.¹⁰

- 16. How can Christians take this unique healing ministry of Paul in Acts 19 too far?**

- 17. While miracles are cool experiences for people, why is it unwise to overestimate the role they play in people's lives?**

DIY Exorcisms

A troupe of professional exorcists billed as "the seven sons of Sceva" claimed to exorcise those who had "evil spirits." They heard about Paul's success casting out evil spirits in Jesus's name and decided to add the name of Jesus to their bag of tricks and incantations. One day Sceva's boys were hired to cast out an evil spirit. To their surprise, when they intoned the name of Jesus over the harassed soul, the evil spirit yelled back, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" At which point the demon attacked the exorcists, and they were last seen "streaking" out of the house and down the street, leaving a trail of bloody footprints!¹¹

¹⁰Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4241-4244). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹¹Ibid.

18. This strange and sad episode reminds us of the danger of being a copycat in ministry. What happens when we try to mimic the godly ministry of others with our own power?

News of the Sceva boys' fiasco got around quickly—probably accompanied by a lot of loud laughing. Not everyone thought it was funny. The incident became the epicenter of a spiritual earthquake. Jesus's name was suddenly known and respected all over town. Misuse of it could send you to the emergency room!¹²

19. The sons of Sceva learned a valuable lesson regarding the occult and demonic forces. What are they and how should they guide us as believers?

BURN BABY BURN!!!

Christians awoke to the fact that faith in Jesus and magic incantations and spells are totally incompatible. Dependence on charms, secret names, and occult practices is sinful. Many confessed their secret evil deeds openly. Many Christians who had secretly hung on to some of their old superstitions after believing in Jesus took dramatic and costly steps to sever the old evil connections. They brought magical scrolls, "Ephesian Letters," lists of angelic names, and occult paraphernalia and, as Ephesus watched, these once-prized items valued at fifty thousand days' wages—several million dollars—went up in holy smoke!

The power of the Word of God was demonstrated most dramatically when the Ephesian believers confessed their evil practices and burned the other books and sources to which they looked for wisdom and hope. They burned their bridges behind them and gave themselves in exclusive allegiance to Christ. What are some things you hesitate to "burn" in order to be really honest and committed to the Lord? What would it cost to let them go? In the twenty-first century wholehearted, no-strings-attached surrender to Jesus still sets people free and gives them real joy.¹³

20. We see at the end of our text that people were so moved by God's power that they rid themselves of anything that would stand in the way of a close and vibrant walk with God. What things might God be asking you to get rid of so that He might have your total dedication and attention?

¹² Girard, Robert C. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4270-4272). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Note: This study was compiled, and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups