

Acts 18:24-19:20 // Effective Ministry

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[0 : 00] Our reading this evening is from Acts chapter 18, verse 24 to chapter 19, verse 20, which is found on the Church Bible, page 1115.

Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man and with thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great father and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brother and sister encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. When he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed, for he vigorously refuted his Jewish opponents in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah.

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

[1 : 36] They answered, No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. So Paul asked, Then what baptism did you receive? John's baptism, they replied.

Paul said, John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.

But some of them became obstinate. They refused to believe and publicly maligned the way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to those who were ill, and their illnesses were cured, and the evil spirits left them.

[3 : 05] Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, in the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.

Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day, the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?

Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this came to known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorceries brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly.

When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to 50,000 drachmas. In this way, the world of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

[4 : 22] Thank you, Joanne, for reading there. As Jamie said, my name's Andrew, and I'm one of the ministry trainees here at the church.

It's a great delight to dive into the scriptures together. There's no outline on the notice sheets this week, but hopefully on the screens that my two sermon points will appear there, and that way you'll be able to follow along with me.

It would be a great help to me if you keep your Bibles open at page 1115 as we look at it together. Let's pray to start. Heavenly Father, we're so privileged to have a night here together where we can read your word in our own languages in relative peace.

We ask that you would still our hearts and minds before you, that you would block out any distractions we may have. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts bring glory to you alone.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. How good a Christian do you have to be before you can start telling other people about Jesus? Not full-time working for a church and gospel ministry, just everyday ordinary life.

[5 : 34] How good at the gospel do you have to be? How much do you have to know? Do you have to have been at growth groups or roots for four years before you can say anything? Do you need to have been at certain conferences or read specific books that's a must-read for every Christian?

I guess that most of us in life feel rather unqualified and ineffective at sharing the gospel, of doing everyday, ordinary gospel ministry. That we're not very good at loving each other or speaking the word in truth to one another, let alone telling our non-Christian friends and people we meet about Jesus.

And maybe as we go into the summer, you look back on six months of the year and you think about the times where you haven't shared the gospel with your friends and you find it hard to do that.

Well, if there's ever even a hint of that in you tonight, I hope that you will leave tonight really encouraged and confident of the truth in our passage that true gospel ministry is the power of the Spirit through us and it does not rely on our own efforts.

It's a Spirit's powerful work through us and it always points to Jesus. The power is the Spirit's and not ours. So we don't need to be at a certain level.

[6 : 46] We just need the Spirit working through us and we can crack on. Most of our time in Acts this term, we spent looking and following Paul as the gospel has spread out rapidly across the world.

And he and his companions have brought the gospel to the ends of the earth and to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. We've seen this rapid expansion. But our passage tonight starts with a brief section on Apollos where he comes on the scene for the first time in the Bible.

And Luke, the human writer of Acts, draws two big comparisons in our passage tonight. We'll look at each one in turn. The first one is between Apollos in chapter 18, verses 24 to 28, and the disciples that Paul finds in chapter 19, verses 1 to 7.

And here we see our first point. True gospel ministry requires the Spirit, not perfection. True gospel ministry requires the Spirit and not perfection. Apollos is from Alexandria.

As Michael said last week, an intellectual center for Jewish and in time Christian thought and academia. He's been steeped in the scriptures for most of his life.

[7 : 59] No doubt he would be an invaluable asset to many different Bible quiz teams on the Old Testament round. But Priscilla and Aquila, listening to him speak in Ephesus, get the sense that his knowledge maybe isn't quite where it could be.

That perhaps as you turn to the gospel round of the quiz, you would have to carry him on parts of it. And so we have a tension here. Look at verse 15 with me. Apollos has been instructed in the way of the Lord.

Yet at the end of verse 26, Priscilla and Aquila had to explain the way of God more accurately to him. That is something about what he knew was inadequate. The way is just a different name given to Christianity at that time.

It pops up a few times throughout our passage. That's just what it means. So Apollos doesn't know everything, notably the baptism of Jesus. But he's working with what he does.

He's doing what he can to tell others that knowing God is what's important. And he knows that God is far too powerful to let his weaknesses get in the way of the gospel going out.

[9 : 05] He's not fazed by what he doesn't yet understand. And when Priscilla and Aquila invite him to learn more, he accepts. He's intelligent. He's from a prestigious place.

But he's humble. And he's humble enough to learn from those who know more. Priscilla and Aquila spent time with Paul last week, as Paul explained Christianity to them.

And now they're spending time with Apollos. It's the older believer helping the younger by explaining what they are yet to understand. Crucially, though, they don't snuff out the passion that we see Apollos has.

They don't berate him for not being able to explain the details of all the Christian life. Not being able to provide a detailed, engaging explanation of penal substitutionary atonement or whatever else it might be.

Verse 27 tells us that Apollos wants to go to Achaia. That's where Corinth is. And they gently explained and Apollos humbly listened so that when he went there, he would be a great help to the church there.

[10:07] They both encouraged him to keep going and they helped him grow. And what's the result? Well, verse 27, he's a great help in Corinth as he vigorously refutes the Jews, proving by the scriptures.

His vigor is still there and his understanding is much greater. He keeps going. Priscilla and Aquila had him for a short time in Ephesus, but they gave what they could to help train him so that when he inevitably moved on, he would be a great help to the wider church.

And that's something that we can do too. We have lots of people in St. Silas who come for a short and limited season and we mustn't grow weary of investing in them and seeking to encourage them on while we're here so that they might depart, even if it's in a short while, before we see the fruit. No doubt as Apollos moves on to Corinth, he's still got things to learn, just like we all do, but the Spirit works through him. Do we encourage those who know less yet are doing their best to keep going?

Or do we turn our noses up at them sometimes and think they ought to leave it to the more knowledgeable, the wiser, the older Christians? The Spirit works through our imperfect actions and efforts.

[11:23] Do you truly believe that? Or sometimes are we really quite quick to blame ourselves when someone doesn't respond exactly as we wanted them to? I know I find it easier to blame myself than to believe that the Spirit works through me sometimes.

But we don't have to be perfect to point other people to Jesus and to encourage fellow believers on. The Spirit worked through Apollos before and after. Priscilla and Aquila explained more to him before he grew more in the Lord.

And God can work whether we completely fluff our lines when we're trying to tell people the gospel or whether we succinctly speak the gospel directly into where they are. It's the Spirit's work that goes through it.

Let's look at the other side of the contrast together now. Chapters 19, verses 1 to 7. Having strengthened the churches en route, Paul arrives in Ephesus. He's been there before, but this time he finds some disciples.

Clearly, they had believed in something. That's what Paul says when he asks them if they'd received the Holy Spirit in verse 2. But the details are scarce on exactly what these guys have believed.

[12:36] Whatever the case, like Apollos, they didn't have everything. These disciples had been given half the message. And crucially, at the end of verse 2, they haven't heard of the Spirit, nor have they received him.

Compared to Apollos, they seem to be much further back. We're told nothing as to what they were like, no positive information like we get about Apollos. Paul seems to have found some very static disciples in need of some help.

And verse 4, Paul tells them how Jesus is the one that John the Baptist spoke of. And they're baptized in Jesus' name, and Paul places his hands on them. The Holy Spirit comes on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy.

And what is it that transforms these disciples' lives? That turns them from being static and inactive to speaking the word? Is it the hearing of Paul's powerful presentation on a five-part lecture series on the fundamentals of the Christian faith?

No, it's receiving the Holy Spirit into their lives, and they're radically transformed. These 12-ish men are now equipped to start speaking about Jesus. And that's exactly what they start doing.

[13 : 45] Paul finds a group of passive, inactive disciples, seemingly lacking what they need to get moving. And when Paul lays his hands on them, the Spirit descends. And the last thing that we hear about this specific group of disciples is that they're speaking full of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit powerfully transforms them for his purposes. So as we seek to tell other people about Jesus, what we need to rely on is the power of the Holy Spirit who transforms lives.

He is much too powerful for his activities to be halted or to be faulted by our ineffective and imperfect actions. His activities are not curtailed by our weaknesses.

We should absolutely seek to grow in our love of God and our knowledge of him, our skill in speaking the truth to one another and to other people who don't know Jesus. But none of these things give us the power to bring people to Jesus.

That's what we see this evening in the passage. None of these things by themselves will make the blindest bit of difference to a human heart if the Holy Spirit is not working through them.

[14 : 59] He is exactly what we need. And if you're a Christian here today, well, I guess you know that we have the Holy Spirit. So we are fully equipped. There is one thing we need before we can get on with telling people about the gospel, and it is the Holy Spirit.

Now, we neither have followers of John the Baptist nor Christians walking around Glasgow without the Holy Spirit. And God uses their somewhat unique situation that Paul finds them in to do two things.

Firstly, the laying on the hands by an apostle onto them, and the Spirit coming afterwards, shows that the gospel really has come to Ephesus, and it really has come to the ends of the earth.

And secondly, we see that Paul does the exact same thing as Peter does back in chapter 8. In chapter 8, Peter confirms that the authentic gospel has gone to Samaria, and Paul confirms that the authentic gospel has gone to the ends of the earth.

And both do it with the laying on of hands and the Holy Spirit coming. And it's the fulfillment of the charge that Jesus gave them back in chapter 1, verse 8, when he told them, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[16 : 21] Part of what's going on here is giving Theophilus and the original readers confidence that Paul's ministry is legit, and it's also really God's work, and the authentic gospel has come to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus said it would at the start of the book.

So we speak, and the Spirit works. We don't need to wait until we feel that we have everything in hand before we talk about Jesus. We don't need to get the intricacies of doctrine before we can tell people that he came to earth as a man and died for them.

We speak, and the Spirit works. We utter barely coherent sentences, and the Spirit still works. It's his power and not ours. Our second point, true gospel ministry is pointing people to Jesus, not themselves.

Chapter 19, verses 8 to 20. The way of the Christian life is letting that Spirit use you as a tool to point others to Jesus. And when people try to use the Spirit, or to use Jesus to point others to themselves, it's very dangerous, and things go very badly wrong.

It is not the way of true gospel ministry, as we see in this section. Paul moves on from those disciples that he met there, and employs his usual method as he heads into the synagogue to speak.

[17 : 45] He's been there before. In chapter 8, verse 19, he was there for a short while, and they asked him to stay for longer. In verse 8, we see that he stays here for three months, arguing persuasively for the kingdom of God.

That's longer than the most other places that he's been on his journeys. Yet, just like in Corinth last week, and throughout the different cities we've seen, there's opposition.

And so, verse 9, he leaves, and he sets up in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. But let's just slow down and look how Luke describes the opposition, because he uses careful words.

He says they're obstinate. That is, they refuse to believe and openly criticize Christianity with evil and spiteful motivations. Obstinate.

A word not often used in the Bible, only used once elsewhere in the New Testament, and that is it quoting an example from it in the Old. But Isaiah foretells of God revealing himself to Gentiles in response to Israel's rejection of him, about 700 years before Paul arrived in Ephesus.

[18 : 55] And some verses should appear on the screen here. And yet, Luke uses obstinate, this word, and says the Jews in Ephesus are the exact same in their attitude to God.

Isaiah 65, verses 1 and 2, in that, speaking through Isaiah, God foretells what he will do in response to Israel's rejection, saying, I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.

I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, Here am I. Here am I. All day long, I have held out my hands to an obstinate people who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations.

Back then, the Jewish people were refusing God's plan and offer of long-term security. Instead, they went off chasing after alliances with Egypt and other worldly powers to save themselves. And here, Luke is reminding us of that and saying these Ephesian Jews are doing the exact same thing. They're refusing to accept the plan of redemption that God has held out in his hands all day long.

[20 : 04] The plan that absolutely flies off the scriptures when you read it. It's not that they don't understand, so don't believe. It's that they refuse to believe.

They hear Paul, they understand, but they actively say, No, I won't believe. They prefer to pursue their own imaginations, just like Isaiah said.

They're not willing to accept God's plan in the way God has made it. They don't want people like Paul who pick up their own cross and follow Jesus rather than pursue their own greatness.

And they certainly don't want a savior who looks like a man on the cross. They refuse to swap their imaginations of how they dreamt that God would save them by sweeping away the Roman Empire and establishing the nation of Israel as a mighty nation on this earth.

In the here and now, that's what they thought would happen. It's their imaginations, and they refuse to swap it for the plan that flies off the scriptures. They are obstinate people. God has held out that plan all of time long, yet they reject the plans of the Spirit and prefer their own plans, plans which focus on themselves and their own greatness.

[21 : 24] And we know people who are like that today, people who say, if there was a God, well, there's no way that he would look like that. The only way that I would accept that there's a God is if he fits in this wee box in my imagination, and God would have to look like this if he was real.

And there's no way that I'll believe in anything else that doesn't fit in that box. And often, they publicly mock Christians and Jesus. Yet such obstinate people cannot stop the word of God from working.

Verse 10 is astounding. Paul stayed for two years, and everyone who lived in the province of Asia, modern-day Western Turkey, heard the word of the Lord. It's an incredible statement.

Conservative estimates, but the number of people there, at least about two million at that time, it's a sensational spreading of the word. In a land previously unreached as a whole, everybody was given the chance to respond to the gospel.

And in such an unprecedented point in the expansion of the gospel, God was confirming that the power there really was his gospel, and it was coming through his chosen messenger.

[22 : 38] Verse 11 says, God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured, and the evil spirits left them.

Notice that God is the instigator, and Paul is the method. It's God's power that he channels through Paul. And miracles are, by definition, quite extraordinary things.

And yet Luke feels the need to tell us that this was an extraordinary miracle that is already extraordinary because it's a miracle. These are truly incredible events.

Paul just touches an apron, and God does the rest. And what's the result? Well, first, in verses 13 to 16, we read of ugly scenes as some Jewish exorcists try to harness the power of Jesus for their own business.

Seeing the power going out through Paul, these people spot a chance to increase their business effectiveness and their bottom line. These seven sons of Sceva attempt to cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus, who Paul preaches.

[23 : 45] In all likelihood, these guys had no relation to any Jewish chief priest, not that we can find, at least, in the records. It's a bit like the car wash that's down the road from mine.

They recently rebranded to be called Five Star Car Wash, and in doing so, wiped all of their ratings. So you now drive by, and you think, Five Star Car Wash? I'll go in there. But their attempted con

goes very badly wrong for them in verse 15.

One day, the evil spirit answered them, Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you? It's as if the evil spirit says, well, I know Jesus, and Jesus is very powerful.

I recognize his authority. And, well, I know Paul, and I know Jesus continues to work through him, but who on earth are you guys? I thought I was in trouble when you started to speak with Jesus' name, but that's not a beat-all Trump's card.

It's not just this magic name you spit out, and then I have to leave this thing. It's a failed hijacking of Jesus' power. You have to have the spirit working through you to be an effective gospel witness.

[24 : 53] It's an attempt to harness the power of God for an end that is not giving glory to God. It just doesn't work. And so the evil spirit-possessed man beat them up, and they fled away naked and bleeding.

The Jewish exorcists sought to use Jesus' name and power to point to themselves and increase their own greatness. And what a contrast that is, this is the second contrast, to Paul, who faithfully taught about Jesus, despite being opposed and publicly maligned for doing so.

And yet the results could not be more different. The Jewish exorcists achieved nothing and left bleeding and naked, having been beat up. But through Paul pointing to Jesus, everyone in Asia heard the gospel and many were healed.

Because true gospel ministry is pointing people to Jesus and not themselves. With the laying on of hands with the disciples earlier, we saw confirmation of the gospel coming to Ephesus.

And along with that, this episode shows that Paul's ministry is just as legit gospel ministry as Peter's. And both ministries are based off Jesus' ministry. That's a big theme throughout Acts and it's why we get some of the details that we do get here.

[26 : 11] In Acts 5, 15, as more and more people heard by the gospel, people brought their ill and possessed onto the streets so that Peter's shadow might pass over him and they would be healed.

And then we've seen in Paul's case, their aprons touched and at a distance they are healed. In both Paul and Peter's case, this miraculous healing at a distance was not a permanent feature of their ministry, but for a short time during a unique episode of gospel growth.

And it's also reminiscent of Jesus when that bleeding woman was healed at the touch of Jesus' cloak as the power went out from him. It's not a normal thing that they expected to happen all of the time, but at a time of God's power going out in a unique time, in a unique case.

But that doesn't mean, of course, that we can't and shouldn't pray that God's power would work radically through our land today. After all this commotion had happened, the city is radically transformed for the better.

What seven Jewish exorcists can't do from the same room, Jesus can do from a distance through his messenger at a distance. Isn't our Lord so powerful? So much more powerful than anything on earth.

[27 : 26] Read with verse 17 with me. When this became known to the Jews and the Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor.

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to 50,000 drachmas.

In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely. And grew in power. The name of the Lord is held in high honor in Ephesus. The speaking of the gospel through imperfect messengers backed by the power of the Spirit has utterly transformed this city.

In a city full of sorcery and magic where the power of those things were seen to be held in the secrecy of it. You have people coming and openly confessing exactly what they have done.

And in doing so, rejecting the power of the old world and saying, I have the power of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit through me. They're denouncing those ways of the city.

[28 : 37] They choose to live with the power of the Holy Spirit instead. And it wasn't just empty talk. Their deeds fully back up their actions, their words.

Ephesus was a big market for sorcery and magic materials. They could easily have sold on all of these valuable possessions. Yet they don't. Instead, they come together and they burn them all. 50,000 drachmas, 50,000 days of work, 6,820,000 pounds in today's money gone up in flames, wiped straight from the local economy.

The kind of choice that only those who have been radically transformed by the power of the Spirit make. And these people are now fully equipped to point to Jesus' name. And in this way, writes Luke in verse 20, in this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. In this way, the way of the Spirit moving through imperfect Christians pointing to Jesus, the word grew in power and was known widely.

[29 : 46] And that's what we're called to do. To keep telling others about Jesus and redirecting them to Him. When we do that, we are in step with God's will and His Spirit will work powerfully to transform lives.

What wonderful and confidence-filling truths. And so whatever happens, whatever someone says or does, we are fully equipped to know exactly what to do. We point them to Jesus and trust that the Spirit will work through us.

We should absolutely seek to grow and mature in Christ, but you do not need to know certain things before you can tell others about Jesus, for it is not in our own power, but the power of the Spirit.

If you are a Christian, you have the Spirit, so you are fully equipped as you are. And as we go into the summer, let's be on the lookout for such opportunities to tell others about Jesus.

Maybe your office will be a bit quieter with people away, and you'll get longer times to chat to fewer people. Maybe you'll be back at home for a while and seeing people that you haven't seen for a while.

[30 : 49] There will be opportunities there that we can take to tell others about Jesus. Or maybe you'll be away at camp having had very little sleep, trying to tell distracted and energetic kids or teens about the Gospel.

Well, you know that just pointing them to Jesus and trusting in the power of the Spirit is exactly what you need to do. And it does not matter how tired you are, because it is the Spirit that works through us.

The Spirit worked to transform Ephesus, a city that was full of pagan ideas, slanderers about Christianity, and people out trying to make a name for themselves on the basis of the Gospel.

And if he can do that, he can certainly transform our city, transform the city of Glasgow and those around us. We just keep pointing to Jesus and the Spirit does the rest.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we are so immensely grateful for the gift of your Spirit to each one of us. Thank you that you choose to involve us in your plan of the Gospel continuing in the ends of the earth, though you do not have to.

[31 : 56] We praise you that your power far surpasses anything on earth and works through our weaknesses. Change our hearts and minds so we may better understand the power of your Spirit through us and guard us from ever seeking to use you for our own glory.

Lord, we long to see Glasgow radically transformed and Jesus' name to be held in high honour across our land. In the mighty name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen. Amen. Over to Greg in the band.