

Acts 18:24-19:20

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[0 : 0 0] So as I'm sure you've just heard from the reading there, we are going to be thinking about quite a diverse range of experiences and stories we read in the book of Acts tonight. We have a man who needs help in his experience and understanding of who Jesus is in order to teach better even though he already is teaching. We have Paul meeting a group of disciples in Ephesus who don't even know who the Holy Spirit is so they need to be baptised. They then start speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Then we have this quite extraordinary use of aprons and handkerchiefs to heal people and this leads to an exorcism which leads to a mass repentance amongst magicians and that is part of what it means to be engaged with the wonderful and strange and beautiful world of what it means to look at the Bible together. And so as we look at it tonight we're going to try and pick out some of the things we see in each of these different stories but we'll obviously not be able to get into detail on everything that is happening in here. So just as a quick overcap we have these three different stories.

We have Apollos who's a teacher from Alexandria who arrives in Ephesus and is taken aside by Priscilla and Aquila to be more expounded in his reality and knowledge of Jesus. You have Paul with the Ephesian disciples who he meets and then you have this interaction towards the end of the section we're looking at tonight where Paul has to deal with essentially false religion. And whenever we're looking at anything in Acts we always have to remember that Acts is the second part of Luke's account of the ministry and life and movement of Jesus' kingdom in this world. The book of Luke, the gospel of Luke is not the end, it is the beginning of God's fulfilling, his promises and the moving of his kingdom into the world. And so the book of Acts has this predominant theme running right through it about the unstoppable nature of God's kingdom and a hugely important component of that, of this narrative, is the beginning of the book is the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost and the moving of the kingdom out. And that's where

Acts starts and it always follows through those themes and different narratives as we arrive at it tonight. And Acts therefore is full of energy and excitement as this early church see God powerfully move in ways and places they would have never expected. And as they try to learn what it means to take the good news of Jesus and his gospel into the nations round about them. It is also therefore full of puzzles and problems they have to work out along the way. Such things as crisis over leadership, money, ethnic divisions, the misuse of power, theology, ethics. And that's before you even get into kind of clashes with religious and political authorities. And as we look at these passages tonight, we are again following that movement of the power of God's kingdom into the world and come up against two potential barriers that could impede that that are dealt with in this section tonight.

The first is about something is lacking, something is lacking for Apollos and something is lacking for the disciples in Ephesus. And the second is about the misuse of power by some Jewish exorcists and by some magicians. And I think both of these things are connected through the full through line of what it means to be fully walking in line in the fullness of what it means to be a follower of Christ, which includes the giving of his spirit, which is something we see in the middle of these three stories and also used powerfully in the final story.

[3 : 35] And so we'll look at these stories in turn, but we're kind of looking at two different sections. One is essentially life in the baptism of Jesus and what that means. And secondly, life not in the baptism of Jesus, which is not some sort of neutral space, but actually just as spiritual, yet not guided and geared towards the full life of the kingdom. So let's look at Apollos and the Ephesian disciples first. So in both these stories, the issue seems to be that both only know the baptism of John. So Apollos, even though he's a powerful teacher, only knows the baptism of John, it tells us in verse 25. And this suggests that while he's heard stuff about Jesus and maybe even some of Jesus is teaching, he's probably definitely not heard about the resurrection. This is even more clear with the disciples in Ephesus. They have no clue who the Holy Spirit is, let alone know potentially some stuff about Jesus. So what is the baptism of John? This is the thing that Luke identifies as an issue with both of these groups that needs to be addressed. Well, the baptism of John is something you can read about in John chapter 3 in a more fuller sense. But in short, it was a renewal movement that was happening in Israel at the time before Jesus came on the scene with his ministry, led by John the Baptist, where people who are identifying with the sin and brokenness in their life were making a physical expression of what it meant to be returned to God and to seek repentance and forgiveness. And the act of going into the water and emerging clean again was a picture of that. John is quite clear that it is not the main thing. But John's baptism was a pointer towards something. You see this kind of represented in a lot of historical art, wherever you see John in a painting, John the Baptist, he's always pointing in some direction because he's pointing to Jesus.

That's the whole point of John's ministry. And he tells us in John 3, whoever receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God. For he gives the spirit without measure. The father loves the son and he has given all things to his hand. Whoever believes in the son has eternal life. John's baptism was always the point to the baptism in reality of being a follower of Christ, which was more than just the repentance of sins. It was the giving of the spirit. It was the gift of eternal life. And it was the love of an acceptance of the father.

Because to be baptised into a name is a sign of identifying with that person. The biblical usage of a person's name represents the person's character, everything that is true about the person. So in being baptised in Christ is to identify with him. It is to take on Christ's character, as well as committing to the life of that person's life and to be a representative of that.

Now when we think about this, there's many different discussions about what the true nature of what's going on in Apollos' heart and these disciples that Paul's meet's heart. Essentially the question is, that can cause a lot of confusion, is were these people actually Christians or are they not?

Were these disciples Christians or were they something else? Was Apollos a Christian who just didn't know some stuff or not? And for some that question is ridiculous. The use of the word disciple of course means they are. And for others, they clearly aren't. If they've never heard of the Holy Spirit, how could you be a Christian? And part of the confusion is the use of the word disciple and the fact that by Apollos seems to be speaking powerfully in the spirit. It says of Apollos in verse 24 and 5, he had knowledge of the scriptures, he had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately. So it's possible these are people who have knowledge of something to do with who Jesus is and what his life in ministry was about.

[7 : 48] Yet, they haven't got the full picture. And for me, I think the passage indicates they probably aren't Christians, particularly the Ephesian disciples. And that is because I think there's three indicators in this passage about why that might be the case. First, they've never even heard of the Holy Spirit.

To be a post-Pentecost believer and have never heard of the Holy Spirit is almost inconceivable. Secondly, they need to be told by Paul that the one to come is Jesus. So they could be disciples of John who were faithful disciples to John's teaching, to repentance and waiting the Messiah, but they might not have heard that the Messiah has now come and risen. And thirdly, they have to be baptized, which is often an action associated with people who are coming to faith. And so as such, for me, I think these passages suggesting that these people, it's not just they have, they're Christians who are somehow missing part of the Trinity, but they do not have the full understanding of what the gospel is and need to, in two very different ways, be brought into that reality. But regardless of what people think about these particular verses, it's safe to conclude that for Paul, by asking this question, the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life is a clear indicator of somebody being a follower of Jesus or not. And there could be a lot of confusion around the nature of the Holy Spirit. And for us, a wee bit, I'd like to talk about the reality of what it means to be in relationship with the Spirit. I know for me, there's been times in my life where I've been kind of left a bit confused and a bit, therefore, disheartened when I hear people talk of the Holy Spirit. In one extreme, I hear people kind of underplay and kind of talk of the Spirit as some sort of oddity within the Christian faith, which has never particularly sat well with me, because we're called to love God in his fullness, Father, Son, and Spirit. Core to Christianity is our

God is three in one. He reveals himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. And we are to grow in relationship with that aspect of who he is, as opposed to downplaying one aspect of who God is. We would never do that with other aspects of the Trinity, would we? We would never read a passage of Jesus's life and teaching and say, well, don't concern yourself with what Jesus is doing there. That's not really important. We would never do that. Yet equally, I've been left disillusioned and questioned and kind of just a bit confused by people who seem to very much emphasize the life and expression of the Spirit as the main thing. That if you're not manifesting extraordinary miracles on a regular basis, are you even a real Christian? The people who overemphasize specific manifestations of the Spirit as somehow the ultimate goal or demonstration or proof that faith is real.

And I have to admit that sometimes when I've heard of speaking of spiritual warfare or spiritual life, part of me just kind of tunes out. It's not because I didn't believe it exists, but I've often shied away for it as there's often a lot of weirdness and strangeness and superstition that seems to come with it. And there can be a lot of confusion for all of us about the nature of the Spirit.

And regardless of where you sit in this experience or opinion on this passage, there's a challenge here for all of us who would call ourselves Christians that we are to grow in our relationship with God. And that includes growing in our relationship with the Spirit. And some of us will find certain aspects of that easier than others. For some, that means we will need to check the way that Paul checks the Corinthian believers in his letter, where he is trying to readdress the balance that they're constantly striving after spiritual highs and spectacular gifts, and therefore despise the more humble practical acts of living in the Spirit, and therefore are demeaning to other Christians because they are not. And he has to remind them of his flowing, beautiful narrative that they're of one body, they're of one worth together. Yet for others, there'll be a challenge that we don't assume we have at all and there's nothing left to seek or grow in. We would never do that, usually with our relationship with God in general. And we have to be careful not to do that with the Spirit. And you always see attention, I think, in Paul's writings, particularly in Ephesians, and I'll try and speak about Ephesians a wee bit, reference Ephesians a wee bit in this, because this is who Paul is speaking to, disciples in Ephesus, that he says to them in one hand, you have every spiritual blessing, this is your status, you have it if you're in Christ. Yet at the same time, he earnestly prays that they, in Ephesians 3.19, that they would come to know his love, although they can never fully know it. And so be completely filled with the very nature of God. Paul always says, this is your spirituality, you have all this, yet you're to seek to grow in it at the same time. And if you're a

[12 : 36] Christian, I believe the Holy Spirit already dwells in you. It's not like you have to find the Holy Spirit after you've become a Christian. It's not like when you buy a piece of technology that needs batteries, you have to go and buy the batteries. The Spirit is the life and power of the nature of what it means to be a Christian. But more than that, it is Jesus's presence with us. So when you receive Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we don't need to continually invite and find other aspects of who God is. The whole thing we're invited to take part in. Yeah, we have to seek and understand and explore that experience. But when Jesus says, when he takes each one of our lives and we give ourselves to him, that he will never leave us, one of the ways he does that is the giving of his Spirit. For Jesus to say he'll never leave us, but then not give us the Spirit would not make any sense. It wouldn't to me anyway. The moment you receive the Spirit, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell in us. He's imparted to us spiritual life, causing us to be born again as children of God. There's one indwelling of the

Holy Spirit, one rebirth of the Holy Spirit, one baptism of the Holy Spirit, all of which occur when you receive Christ. Yet at the same time, being filled with the Holy Spirit, however, is not the same thing.

That's a difference. It's about growing in your experience and relationship with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5.18, Paul says, be filled with the Spirit. And the original Greek of being filled is be continually filled. So to think a wee bit about the Holy Spirit, I'm just going to reel off some of the things Jesus in the Bible tells us of who the Holy Spirit is and what he's like in order we may grow in relationship with that. Firstly, the Holy Spirit is a person. It's not just some disembodied force or some sort of spiritual power ranger who appears to do the bidding and will of Jesus every now and then.

Jesus says that it's better for him to leave so that the Spirit may come and indwell in each one of us. That is the better reality. Jesus describes the Spirit as another helper, an advocate, a counselor.

He reminds us of all the things Jesus taught. He guides us in truth. He is alive in the world and in us. The Spirit comes to give new birth and new life. It is the seal in our soul. The Spirit helps us to pray and worship even, Romans tells us, when we don't have the words to use. It empowers us in our witness to Christ. It empowers us with spiritual gifts. It strengthens us to overcome temptations.

[15 : 01] It continually wants to pour God's love into our hearts and it transforms us more and more into the likeness of Christ. It is the power and reality of God at work in this world. It is alive in me and new. We have to grow in it in the same way. We have to grow in understanding of knowledge of God the Father and we have to grow in understanding of our knowledge of Jesus, our brother. We have to walk in that reality. And then I think Acts then goes on to show, so Paul baptizes them into this reality. They have the fullness of Jesus and with that comes the Spirit. And that's where you see these manifestations of speaking in tongues and prophesying, which the rest of the scriptures go on and talk about in other places. And then in Acts 19 it goes to show even more, I think, extreme and therefore unique examples of the power of the Spirit of the work to the point where things that Paul has touched are used to heal other people. I think it's important that it says things that Paul has touched. It's not, I don't think it's saying a precedence for all believers to then bless things and use that to heal others. It's an expression of the life and ministry Paul is working in, that God is working in through Paul at that time. Because otherwise it would be a bit fair game to some things we unfortunately do see where people use things. Like you can go into certain television channels and buy blessed things to be sent to you to heal you. And you can have this therefore misuse of power, which is actually where Luke addresses, is what Luke addresses next in Acts 19 verses 13 onwards. So what we see next is the opposite of all this.

For what happens when we aren't engaged in the life of Christ and the life of the Spirit? It's not some neutral blankness, but instead it is an equally spiritual world, but not orientated around the love and power of Christ and the kingdom of God. And here we see Paul encounter some false religion, where he encounters others who are pursuing to use the language of Jesus to work miracles without being caught up in the life of Jesus themselves. And it works to a point, but it stops. And you have this kind of unique story where it's actually ironic on one level, you have these exorcists who are then chased out of themselves by a demon who says, I know Jesus, I even know this Paul, but I don't know who you guys are. They're trying to use an expression of something of the life of being caught up in the reality of Jesus without giving of themselves to Jesus. And Paul has to come in and deal with this, and he does. He comes in and deals with it immediately. There's no sense of whether Paul can do this or not, because it's not really Paul doing anything here. It's again, it's a manifestation of the power of the Spirit at work. I'm not sure what you think about when you hear things about demons and dark forces, but the Bible is very clear right from the beginning that you cannot avoid that there's a reality bigger than the one we know. There's this other dimension for life right from the start in Genesis 1 and all the way through to the end. There's this whole intermediary world, which sometimes is boiled down to angels and demons, but actually is far wider than that.

However, what we're seeing here, I think, is real, but is an extreme example of something. When Jesus, if we looked at what Jesus says about the Spirit, what Jesus says of this world, for me, one of the key passages is John 8, which is Jesus is expounding on the reality of the devil, who is described under many different names in the Bible, but is the head of that movement against God's movement and power in the work in the world. And the main way Jesus describes what the devil is like and what he's up to is as a liar. So he says in John 8, 44, he lies, he speaks, when he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

And Jesus roots that in the garden. And you see that's the enemy's tactic pretty much throughout the scriptures. He lies to Adam and Eve. As Dallas Willard says, the devil doesn't come at Eve with a stick, but with an idea. When he comes to tempt Jesus in the wilderness, he doesn't come with armies or attacks. He tempts with a different way of looking at life. And it's very much the same today.

And this is an extreme example of this. It's a distortion of reality in order to point away from the kingdom of God and away from what it means to be caught up in the life that Christ offers each one of us.

[19 : 20] It's part of the reason walking in line with the spirit is so key. Jesus tells us in John 13, 16, when the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own.

He will speak only what he hears and he will tell you what is yet to come. The spirit, one of the things the spirit does is guides us in truth. Partly that means when we read scripture, truth is made alive to us, but it's also in the world in which we live. I think we can very often, we do, we live in a world where most people don't believe in God, let alone believe in this idea that there's more going on here than what we can see. In fact, it's one of the places where Christians have an open posture compared to what the rest of the world would say. We're calling the rest of the world to be open-minded when often we're accused of being closed-minded. And the spirit is one of the ways we are unable to walk well in this, but there is always something it seeks to undermine this. And the truth, the spirit points back to truth of the truth of who Christ is and how we see that at work in the world. So the issue isn't whether this is real or not, it's whether it's true.

And when truth comes, when the power of truth manifest in the spirit comes here in the person of Paul, there is no competition. When this man, when this man known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, this is verse 17 of chapter 19, they were all seized by fear and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. For the man who, it says before this, who had the evil spirit jumped in them and overpowered them all. And he had given them such a beating. So there was real fear.

But this fear was turned into a reality of the power of God, where the name of Jesus is held high. And so just to finish, I'd like to finish with some principles I think we see in this passage, in these passages about what it means to live fully in this reality, to live fully of people who are baptized in the fullness of what it means to be part of, caught up in a relationship with Jesus, where we have the spirit dwelling with us. And then we're called to live in that reality in the world.

And that therefore will put us in collision courses sometimes with things that are not true, the things that are seeking to undermine the reality of God's kingdom in us and as a community.

[21 : 49] And the first one I think you see is a very basic principle of discipleship. With Apollos, he is speaking. And the way it changes is because Priscilla and Aquila, this young couple, hear him. They don't just hear him, then they invite him in, they treat him with respect, they don't criticize him, and they seek to unpack with him more and more. And it says Apollos then goes on to be a great encouragement to the other believers. When you think of even just that little story, Priscilla and Aquila were Jewish tent makers alongside Paul. They were clearly now Christians.

They now hear somebody else who knows some stuff of Jesus, but he doesn't know the whole story. They help him. Then Apollos then goes on to help others. And that's a picture of what it means to be and make disciples in the world, is that as we journey alongside people, we help each other be in the full reality of what it means to be known by Christ. Same with Paul. He meets these people, he speaks questions to them. He doesn't shame them or make them feel lesser, but he unpacks the reality of what it means to be fully known by Christ and for Christ to fully know them. He prays for them, and he then is part of their baptism. There's this involvement in each other's life where we're not called to be lone ranger Christians, but as we seek and walk together in life, we will experience the full reality of what that means. I know for me, probably like a lot of people, some of the most significant times in growth in my faith have been where people who have known me and loved me, have seen how I behave or act or speak, and invited me into a deeper reality of understanding who Jesus is. They may address something. They help me then see how that thing is then directed towards who Christ says I am and who he says I am to be in this world.

Secondly, seeing the Spirit at work. Now, people can hear many different things when I say that phrase, but I think there is a very basic reality that all Christians have the Spirit at work in them, have the Spirit alive in us, and is already at work around the boat us, and the challenge is often do we see and acknowledge it. So if you read the scriptures and your heart is moved to feel more warmth towards Christ, more worship towards God, more trust in the Spirit, that is the Spirit at work.

That's not just you've had a great moment or thought on that day. If you are speaking to a brother or sister and you or them are struggling with something and you pray for one another and they experience a bit more freedom in that area, that's either just a nice happy coincidence or the Spirit's been at work.

And actually there's lots of little places where I think the Spirit is at work around the boat us and to give the Spirit credit where it's due and to call it out for what it is. I think when we do that, I know for me, it's kind of developed a framework of, oh, the reality and the kingdom of God is all around me.

[24 : 36] My job is to trust the Spirit as he seeks to lead me in truth and therefore what it means to flourish as a follower of Christ and to help therefore others do that too. Whenever you feel convicted of sin, that is the Spirit, which is different from condemnation. The enemy condemns. There's no condemnation now in Christ. Condemnation is this kind of weighty, useless, vague feeling that doesn't really go anywhere. A conviction is something specific. It's when the Spirit lays a specific thing in my heart and leads me into repentance, which is the final and third thing. It's the final and third thing we see here in Ephesus that this power move of the gospel and the power move of the Spirit leads to this repentance of people who then start burning and getting rid of books. And just as a aside, this is not some sort of affirmation of Christians as burning loads of books when they don't agree with something or the way that the Nazis were perceived to do. This is a personal response to rid themselves of things that were directly in opposition with being people who are led and live in the reality and power of truth of Christ. And that will happen to all of us when we realize there's things that take us away from the reality of who God is, that sometimes we need to adjust our lives and rid ourselves of certain things. And we're constantly bombarded with different narratives and things that constantly do that. And therefore, we need to be aware of that's happening and walk in truth. And there will be times where we need to take a step away. For me, I've had to take steps away from my phone over lockdown. There's literally times where it just feels overwhelming and telling me different narratives of the world and what is real and what is true and to put that as one side and to walk in truth and seek what is genuinely true of me and the world as a different direction.

And Luke kind of finishes with this emphasis on the power of the Word of God. So all these different experiences, he brings it back round in verse 20 where he says, in this way, the Word of the Lord spread wildly and grew in power. Luke emphasizes the inherent power of the word of God, showing that it is the gospel that triumphs over all demonic powers.

The lacking of Apollos and Ephesian disciples is made up for the power of great Jesus, which is part of the giving of the Spirit. And these demonic forces, they're nothing compared to true faith in Christ. Not just the name of Jesus, but the fact that Paul has Jesus in him, that the Spirit is at work in him. And that's a challenge to each one of us, about what it means to work in fellowship, as people who are seeking to be and make disciples of one another, who are seeking to engage and build a relationship with the Spirit in the same way we would with the Father and the Son, knowing and trusting the Spirit is here. We don't have to go and find him. He is given to us as a gift. And that therefore can sometimes also lead to repentance and the cleansing of practical steps in our life, not just for the sake of it, because things are bad, but because it frees up space to walk more fully in truth and in life. Because that is Jesus' offer to everybody, truth, life and hope that has made its home in each one of us and calls us into a new relationship with ourselves, with others and with God.

Thank you.