

“Problematic Practices”
Acts 19:11 – 20

“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.

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 I know about Paul, 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 became 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 honour.

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 fifty thousand drachmas.

In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.”

So that’s our passage this morning.

If you were in my shoes where would go with it?
Tell the person next to you.

Tell the person next to you.

So we have Paul and God is through him doing some extraordinary, exceptional and remarkable miracles. These are not the norm. It says that handkerchiefs and aprons that had just touched him were healing the sick and driving out demons.

Then there are these exorcists.

They see Paul, they see how effective he is and they attempt to drive out a demon using a combination of Paul and the name of Jesus like a magic formula – and it goes terribly wrong.

The up side is that people having seen what's happened turn to Jesus and they light a match.

They had a bonfire.

They burned their scrolls publically.

Worth around 50,000 drachma's, which ranges between \$4 million – \$14 million in value today.

So it was costly.

Which, by the way, is a mark at times of true discipleship.

Why did they destroy such valuable material?

Well they joined the dots.

For one, their powerlessness in the face of evil spirits compared to Paul and other Christians.

And two, where is all happening where?

In the city of Ephesus.

What do we know and about Ephesus?

Well for one, Ephesus was well known for its embrace of magic.

It was a hub for those engaging in occult practices.

It was major centre of paganism, magic, astrology, and the occult in the Greco-Roman world.

In fact there were a highly celebrated sequence of six ancient Greek magical words called the "Ephesian Letters" that functioned as a spells and were used throughout the Mediterranean world.

So the implication is the state of the evil spirit possessed man is directly related to practice all kinds of sorcery and occult found in Ephesus.

What's of note is that it says there were two groups living in Ephesus, who were? Greeks and Jews, and that many came to believe in Jesus.

It also says that they confessed their deeds and there were those who practiced sorcery.

So in other words, the suggestion is that even some *Jewish people* were engaged in the occult practices strictly forbidden by their faith in God.

Where do we find this list of forbidden practices?

If only we had a list...

Well we actually do. Did you know that?

It's found in Deuteronomy 18:9 – 13:

“When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there.

¹⁰ Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or necromancer, or who consults the dead.

Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.

You must be blameless before the Lord your God.”

This repeated in again in various ways throughout the Old Testament.¹

These all involve efforts to obtain knowledge which is ordinarily hidden, and the means of attaining it is through dealings with the spirit world or with mysterious supra-natural forces.

God has set a boundary in place that we're not to transgress and there is great danger in accessing this forbidden realm.

It is a murky, shadowy world that we don't know much about.

I mean, there is no reason to think we can control these encounters or the forces involved and they actively opposed to God.

¹ For example Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 19:26, 31; 20:27; Isaiah 8:19 – 20;

Someone may say well, "That was the Old Testament; we live following the New Testament. We're not bound by these laws."

What I would say is, yes the ceremonial law (which governed temple worship) and civil law (which governed Israelite society) have passed away, but the moral law still remains under Jesus.

The thing is what you see here in this passage is this: we have this one group, believers in Yahweh, the God of Israel and yet they were engaged in occult practices which were strictly forbidden.

And even today I sometimes – not often – come across Christians who are involved in problematic practices.

One frequent area from the past was that of Freemasonry and its vows. One vow states that if obligations are broken:

"I most solemnly and sincerely promise and swear, ...binding myself under no less penalty than that of having my throat cut from ear to ear, my tongue torn out by its roots, and buried in the sands of the sea, at lower water mark..."

Another speaks of having the chest torn of the breast being torn open and having one's heart pulled out, and another vow speaks of being sawn in two and having ones intestines pulled out.²

When vows like these are taken they bring a curse on yourself and is an opening to evil malignant powers.

It was not uncommon for church attendees to also attend lodge meetings.

Today there is increasing debate around what is appropriate when it comes to Maori spirituality? Matariki, for example, involves a practice called the ""feeding the stars with a sacred offering".³

A former New Age practitioner who turned to Jesus says, "Over the past 30 years I've encountered Christians worldwide who, after hearing testimonies like mine, have confessed practising New Age or channelling 'spirits or aliens'"

² Freemasonry Overview <https://www.namb.net/apologetics/resource/freemasonry-overview/>

³ "What is Hautapu?" <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/digital-museum/explore-digital-museum/matariki-maori-new-year/what-is-a-hautapu>

If you're not sure about an area, do some research. Find a good source from which to learn. If you're still not sure, talk to a wise Christian.

So it could be for some of us it's this: *shut the gate*.

Get rid of the tarot cards, throw out the crystals, burn the New Age books, stop consulting with clairvoyants!

You cannot hold Christ in one hand and New Age/occult practices in the other.

I mean, why would you want to be involved in a realm that actively opposed to Jesus?

If you need to, shut the gate today, when you get home. Don't wait.

So you have this one group, the Jews in Ephesus.

Then there are the..?

The Greeks.

There appears to be, at least for them, no prohibition.

In fact you could say for them it was encouraged in the practices.

And there many people like that in world today and in our communities.

So the problematic practices are not with us but may be people we know.

It could be family members.

It could be friends.

Neighbours.

And so understandably the question is, what do you do in those situations?

"What would you do if, in a conversation tomorrow, a friend of colleague, or a neighbour shared with you a crystal they carry around with them, or told you about a medium they went to see or went to show hosted by a psychic?"

As Christians we don't withdraw in fear, we don't say the practises are harmless.

We recognise the spiritual realm as being very real.

This is a spiritual battle so prayer is our best response.

And when we pray, we pray remembering the words Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus – Ephesians 6:12:

"For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against persons without bodies—the evil rulers of the unseen world, those mighty satanic beings and great evil princes of darkness who rule

this world; and against huge numbers of wicked spirits in the spirit world.”

We pray hearts would be softened and eyes would be opened.

And that’s what we see here our text this morning.

Their eyes were opened by the terrible experience of the seven sons of Sceva.

Often it’s the same for those engaged in the New Age and occult.

Satan masquerades as angel of light and needs to be unmasked.

Many years ago I read the story of Randall Baer.

Randall Baer was for many years a top authority in the New Age movement.

He wrote numerous books on “crystal power” and finding enlightenment through some of the practices mentioned in Deuteronomy.

Baer was having an out-of-body experience where he said it was like he was overwhelmed by a cascade of colour and light – it was as if he was looking straight into the sun. Waves of bliss radiated through his spirit. He was totally captivated by the experience.

Then suddenly, another force stepped in.

It took him totally by surprise.

In the twinkling of an eye, as if a supernatural hand had taken him behind the scene of the experience that I was having.

He was taken behind the outer covering of the dazzling luminosity and there he saw something that left him literally shaking for days.

What he saw was the face of devouring darkness.

Behind the glittering facade of beauty lay a massively powerful, wildly churning face of absolute hatred and unspeakable abominations – the face of demons filled with the power of Satan.

For a moment that seemed like eternity, he realized that I was in was in serious spiritual danger.

Baer goes on to talk about how that incident led to his own commitment to become a follower of Jesus and his absolute rejection of the New Age and occult.

Jessica tells her story of always being attuned to the spiritual realm. She just had this ability to just see and know things which no human had told her. When she was young she knew her birth details in great detail. She was moved to tears when she discovered the next door neighbour had

cancer; her mother assured her it wasn't true only to find out that he did.

Jessica soon pursued tarot, psychic readings, basic spells – nothing heavy at first. I did a spell to protect me from the bullies at school – and two of them left the following week! I thought: *This is great! This stuff really works.*

She describes one experience where she was working with her spirit guides that helped her in her physic work. She had been told the spirit guides were demons deceiving her. She didn't believe it but decided to test it. When engaging with these spirit guides she prayed, "Show yourself in the name of Jesus." She explains that what manifested after that left her with no doubt that the spirit guides were demons.

Once she saw this she never went back. She shut the door on New Age and occult practices there and then. God saved her and today she helps others see the reality of what they are doing and come to a saving faith in Jesus.

So their eyes were opened to the darkness and they saw something else – the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

"....when this became 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 honour.*"

That phrase 'high honour' means praised, glorified, exalted.

They saw the name of Jesus is greater than incantations or spells or enchantments they could summon.

Greater and more powerful to any spirit or demon that might call on.

Next Saturday... the Light Party... it's Halloween.

It's not uncommon to go to a party – even a dinner party – and someone says, "Hey, let's do a séance".

"It's Halloween, let's get out the Ouija board!"

Yet we can people of the light, God's light.

We can people who talk of the wonderful, beautiful power of life found in Jesus.