

“The Reality of Evil and Spiritual Warfare”

Acts 19:8-20

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

I want to speak to you today on a subject that probably doesn't get enough “press time” in the church...at least not as much as it should in my opinion. Usually when this subject is talked about, those that address it float between two extremes.

On one hand, I've seen the subject sensationalized and exaggerated. I won't say blown out of proportion, but certainly it can lean that way and when people talk about it or give examples of it, it can be overwhelming to the point that for the listener, the subject either becomes too unbelievable or just too much – and we quickly move on.

I've also experienced the Church downplay this subject...never talk about it. There is certainly a mystery to it and an element of the unknown. Outside of a few texts that deal with the subject, the reality is we don't know much about it because it's invisible. We can't see it with our physical eyes.

Yes, it manifests itself sometimes as we'll see in the text we are looking at today – this is why we are dealing with it in the first place. But all in all, we're not privy to what is taking place because for the most part it's taking place in the spiritual realm. It's veiled!

The subject I'm talking about is the title of the message today. I'm calling it: **The Reality of Evil and Spiritual Warfare**

Now, if you are a guest to our church or new to the Bible and not familiar with teachings of scripture, let me as we get going give you a 50,000 foot view of what the Bible teaches about evil and spiritual warfare.

I think talking about this up front may help us understand a little bit better what we read takes place here in Acts 19. Here are three facts as it relates to evil and spiritual warfare:

1. We struggle with real evil

I don't think I have to stay here long and don't think you need convincing of this, I just want to highlight it in this moment and emphasize that there is real evil in the world today.

We see it manifest itself all the time. I bring you, the situation in the Ukraine – exhibit A, your honor. What we see happening there with the Russian invasion, the merciless killing of civilians including children and senior adults – that's evil to the core.

And I use the word “core” purposefully, because where you see evil fruit, you will find an evil root.

From a Christian worldview and perspective, evil is the absence of that which is good. As believers, some of us grew up with this doctrinal statement about God. We said, “God is good – all the time. And all the time – God is good.”

God is not the author of evil...he didn't create it. What he created was free beings (angelic and human) and gave them legitimate freedom in that they could FREELY choose to do good OR reject good. When good is rejected, evil is what we inevitably choose and are left with.

Evil is real. Often times it is broken into two categories. You have moral evil – that's what we've been talking about – is comes from the freedom to make decisions – murder, hatred, rape, abuse, jealousy...all these are what we would classify as moral evil.

And as a result of the very first moral evil – the act of rejecting God's Word in the Garden of Eden – i.e. rejecting God – i.e. rejecting good - sin entered the world and as a result there is what we call natural evil.

Man's sin throws even nature into chaos (Rom. 1) and you have natural disasters like hurricanes, tornadoes...you have diseases and droughts and famines – all we would classify as evil.

Listen: There is an entire branch of philosophy and theology called theodicy, that deals with this subject in detail!

Books – volumes and volumes and volumes – you have theologians and philosophers down through the ages that have dealt with this question of evil and its relation to God.

What is NOT in question is that evil exist and we haven't even scratched the surface of talking about it. Secondly, as it relates to the reality of evil and spiritual warfare:

2. We have a real enemy

He goes by many names in the scripture. He is called the Devil. He is called “The Enemy”. He is called “The Accuser”. If you're an old school Sat. night live person, “Could it be, Satan?!”

That's funny, but he is no laughing matter. Just a couple of verses from scripture that highlight him and his mission:

John 10:10a – “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy...”

1 Pet. 5:8 – “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Other places in scripture he's called a Liar, a Murderer, a Wolf. It's hard sometimes when we are inundated with cartoon figures of a person in red tights and a pitchfork to take this idea of a Devil seriously.

Again, there is a spiritual element to this and none of us have ever seen Satan with our physical eyes (that we are aware of – the Bible says he can masquerade as angel of light – 2 Cor. 11:14).

So we can sometimes be lulled to sleep and forget about him or not even think about his role or think that he or demons have an active role in our lives.

We'll look at this verse later, but Ephesians (the setting for where our text in Acts 19 we're studying today is). Paul wrote:

Eph. 6:12 – “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Satan is called in (Eph. 2:2) – “the prince of the power of the air”. He's at work in our world today along with his demonic forces (fallen angels – another sermon for another day) – they live to create chaos in God's creation, specifically desiring to thwart his purposes and bring ruin to his model creation – those made in his image – man and woman.

One final note before moving on. Satan is a created being. Never forget this! Sometimes we put him as a representative for evil having the same amount of power as Jesus, our representative for good.

That's a mistake. Satan is a created being, who is on a leash! His head was crushed at the cross and in the resurrection and he knows his days are numbered. We ought to respect his power and ability, we'll talk about that more in a bit, but we ought not fear him.

1 John 4:4b – “...for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.”

The third fact concerning the reality of evil and spiritual warfare:

1. We struggle with real evil
2. We have a real enemy
3. **We are in a real war**

It's invisible, but you better believe it's real! You may not feel it at the present time. You may not sense any hint of a struggle going on or any tension within, but the Bible is clear, we are in a spiritual battle.

There is war imagery and language throughout the scripture. Let me give you some examples. I already pointed out to you the Ephesian 6 passage of scripture (“our battle is not against flesh and blood”). Listen to these other passages of scripture:

2 Corinthians 10:3-4 – “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.”

2 Timothy 2:3-4 – “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.”

Phil. 2:25 – “I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier...”

Peter uses this war language in **1 Peter 2:11 – “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”**

There is a war taking place all around us. And just because it's invisible, don't think for a moment that it doesn't exist! That type of thinking can get us in some real trouble.

Illus. Gravity is invisible...but you climb to the top of a building and jump off, you will see it is very, very real. Oxygen is invisible...but you try living without it for a few minutes, you will see it is very, very real. Electricity is invisible...but you try holding on to something that has an electrical current running through it. You will find out, it too is very, very real.

We struggle with real evil. We have a real enemy. And we are in a real war. All of this, I want you to keep at the forefront of your mind and heart as we look at our major text today – Acts 19:8-20.

Remember, Paul is in Ephesus. He is on his third missionary journey. We're talking around 52-57 AD. **(SHOW MAP).**

After leaving home base, he's traveled through the regions of Galatia and Phrygia checking on churches he's planted and established on the first two missionary journeys and then he arrives here in Ephesus.

Now, this is an extremely important city for Paul. He would spend nearly three years in this city (longer than he spent anywhere else!) laboring for the sake of the gospel and the advance of the Kingdom.

During his ministry here churches would be founded in places you've heard of if you're familiar with the Bible: Laodicea, Colossae, Hierapolis – what is referred to as the Lycus River Valley region.

It was during his years at Ephesus that Paul wrote two letters to Corinth – one is a missing letter that is lost to history and the other is the letter we know of as 1 Corinthians.

A LOT of ministry, and A LOT of good took place from right here in Ephesus, but it wasn't easy!

When we talk about the reality of evil and spiritual warfare – I'm going to go out on a limb here and say, I don't know of another place in the New Testament that was as tough to get a work going in than Ephesus precisely BECAUSE of the evil and spiritual warfare that was taking place in that city and for that city.

Let me give you some context and you will understand why I say this. First of all, it was a major city at the time and the capital of the Roman Province of Asia. It had a population of somewhere between 200-250,000 people.

It was a port city which meant it was open for business by both land and sea (**SHOW MAP**). It had major roads that went in every direction, north, south, east and then the Aegean Sea to its west.

So you could travel anywhere in the known world from this spot: Macedonia, Egypt, Israel and the Middle East – anywhere you wanted to go.

It was also home to a “courier school” that taught and trained people how to be messengers and deliver letters when they are sent – Paul wrote 14 letters that we know of...could have been here he learned the power of circulation and strategy behind it.

You can see why when Paul came to this city, he was ready to roll up his sleeves and get to work. He saw this influential city and thought, “I can reach the world from right here!”

And it’s because of its influence and potential that I believe Satan and his demonic forces were going to dig in and fight!

- No way were they going to lose round they had taken...at least not without a fight!
- NO way were they going to let Paul come in, set up camp, plant a church easily and ruin what they had set up in Ephesus which was a spiritual stronghold for them up to this point.

Here's what I mean by that. Ephesus was home of magic. It was like Hogwarts for all you Harry Potter fans!

We know of actual textbooks if you will from Ephesus that had spells and incantations within them. To be able to recite these and say these words, gave one power (it was thought!) over the supernatural and spirit world.

G. Campbell Morgan – “The atmosphere of the city was electric with sorcery and incantations, with exorcists, with all kinds of magical imposters.”

I say all this to say, you have this highly influential city that has already welcomed the occult into it! Ephesus was a city that was dedicated to worshipping the goddess, Diana (in Latin) or Artemis (in Greek).

And by dedication, I mean REALLY dedicated. They built a temple to her that took 220 years to build. If you thought the Parthenon in Athens was big...this temple was four times the Parthenon!

Here's a picture of what it would have looked like (**SHOW PIC**). This Temple one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. You can travel there today and see its ruins.

Illus. CF Connect this weekend - Now, it's hard enough to plant churches and advance the gospel in dark areas where there is no witness. (CF Connect this weekend). Add welcoming the occult into it and worshipping false gods, it becomes that much harder!

Illus. Dustin Turner/New Orleans – I was talking with Dustin this week about planting in New Orleans and just how hard it has been and we were talking about this right here.

New Orleans would be hard enough as it is to plant a church! It's hot! It's dirty! As good as the food is, it's not an easy place to live. But add on top of that it's history with the occult...with the rampant immorality and idolatry of self-pleasure and it makes planting in that city that much harder – Satan has a stronghold and he's NOT just going to let it go!

That's Ephesus! And THIS is the city Paul comes into and makes it his "home base" for nearly three years.

Remember: We are in a struggle with real evil. We have a real enemy. And we are in a real war. NO WAY in this real struggle with evil...against this real Enemy (Satan)...NO WAY is he going to just let Paul and these followers of Jesus take this city without a real war.

And we finally get to our text in **Acts 19:8-9** – **“And he entered the synagogue and for three months (this was the beginning of his stay there and he did what was typical of him – he went to the synagogue – this is where he typically always started!) spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief (unbelief hardens the heart – the more you say “NO” the voice of God, the harder your heart gets. That's why the bible says in Heb. 3, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart!” – unbelief hardens the heart! BTW, who helps harden the heart? Our real Enemy, Satan – Matt. 13 parable), 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.”**

We don't know who Tyrannus is...his name means “tyrant”. Did his parent's name him this? Not a bad name to give a few kids I've known! Maybe his parents gave him the name...maybe his students gave him the name?

This would have been a lecturing hall that would have been used in the morning and evening hours. Scholars tell us it is highly likely that Paul used it between 11am and 4pm – that's when most businesses would shut down for lunch and afternoon rest time.

I'm thinking about bringing that back! Shut down for lunch and a nap from 11-4! Ha! My grandpa would say to me, “What do you need a nap for, as a preacher, you only work once a week! Thanks, Paw-paw!!! (btw – still happens today – missions)

We don't know if Tyrannus gave Paul his lecturing hall and allowed him to use it...or did he rent it out? Some have suggested that Priscilla and Aquila maybe funded it. That's possible! Perhaps they had the gift of giving and as tent-makers used their business to help fund Kingdom purposes.

We have many of you that have the gift of giving and do just this! We all should give so the work of Christ can go forward, but there are some of you with the gift of giving and God has blessed you to help fund Kingdom ministry. God bless you for that...it's what God gave us wealth for – to give and lay up treasure in heaven!

Check this though: Did you get how long Paul labored doing this? Look at (v. 10).

Acts 19:10 – “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

Amazing! Couple of things to highlight here: We are so used to instant gratification, aren't we? If we want something to eat, order it on the app and you don't even have to get out of your car, it can be brought to you...no wait time!

Want something tom? Amazon Prime it! Don't cook anything, just zap it in the microwave! And how many of us stand there impatiently watching whatever it is we are cooking?

Illus. Popcorn and airplane internet – I caught myself doing this twice last week. Once was on a plane...the internet was being slow and I was so put out because I was trying to get some work done! Now, just think about that! I'm flying at 30,000 ft and getting somewhere in 3 hours that would take me 20 if I drove! And I'm getting impatient about a signal that somehow miraculously bounces off a satellite in orbit while I'm riding high in a plane!

Also did it popping some popcorn. It took three minutes and I was so bent out of shape because I was going to miss some of the March Madness game – never mind I can now press pause on the TV and speed through to catch what I missed! What on earth!

We live in a world of instant gratification. And sometimes we take this mindset into our spiritual lives. We think if I read the Bible consistently for a week, I ought to be growing in holiness...I ought to see some results!

And we get frustrated when the “old creation”...the “old man” as it's called in scripture...the “flesh” doesn't just go away. We want to be spiritual giants, but we want it overnight and get upset when it doesn't happen.

Listen, discipleship takes time! Paul knew that those he was working with in Ephesus...it was going to take some time for them to learn the faith...time for them to grow and develop...time for them to understand doctrine and learn spiritual habits that would help them grow and become strong.

He took two years the Bible said and did this DAILY. Demonic strongholds are not going to be broken over night! Renewing our mind in truth is not a one time event!

Paul labored. He worked. He disciplined. He invested his life into others. And as a result? Look at it...the second part of (v. 10) fires me up!

Acts 19:10 – “This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

Paul's work paid off! It took time...A LOT of time. But the scripture says as a result all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

And here's the deal: They didn't hear it from Paul! They heard it from those Paul disciplined! Talk about passing your faith on!

People would come to hear the word of God being taught and who knows how long they stayed...probably varied in a great way, but when they left, they left on mission and as a result all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

Would that THAT be said of us, Champion Forest. Our mission is not complete until we can say ALL of Houston as heard the word of the Lord...it's still not complete then.

We can't be satisfied...we haven't arrived...there is still so much work to do!

Illus. HCPN – Houston Church Planting Network this week...and this is what we were talking about as pastors in Houston. How can we work together and pray together that ALL of Houston hears the word of the Lord.

I'm on this right now, personally...this is my heart, Church. I want God to use US in such a way that all of Houston is hearing the word of God...that you are taking it with you once we leave this place each week and you are sharing Jesus and making disciples from your workplace, school, or business...this is our calling!

Illus. CF Connect, Residency Program, new forms of media

But, listen, if we get serious about this and make the decision together to do this, it's not going to be easy! There is going to be a cost. We will struggle with real evil when we start advancing the cause of Christ. An enemy that is very real is going to come against us...we're already in a war, but when we start taking ground we may find ourselves on the frontlines!

****Some of you are in it RIGHT NOW! There is a battle for your soul being waged, RIGHT NOW! There is a battle for your priorities being waged RIGHT NOW! In this very moment.****

My challenge for us as a Church is to war well! Let's put on the full armor of God and let's as the Church of Jesus Christ push back darkness! More on that when we bring this message to a close.

Let's turn our attention to the second story that highlights the reality of Evil and Spiritual Warfare.

Acts 19:11-12 – “**And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul**, (a miracle in and of itself is extraordinary, but in the language of the New Testament, this verse can literally be rendered “God was doing works of power, not the ordinary ones.” In other words, the miracles God was doing through Paul was special and unique EVEN for miracles– for instance – v. 12) 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.**”

Okay...so we see that God is demonstrating his power through Paul in a unique way. He did the same thing for Peter's ministry. In fact, both these men were able to:

- Heal people who were handicapped...
- Both cast out demons...
- Both raised the dead...
- Both were released from prison in a supernatural way.

Now, Peter's handkerchief never healed anyone that we know of, but his shadow did (Acts 5:15). What's going on here?

The answer: **2 Corinthians 12:12** (Paul defending his ministry writes) – “**The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.**”

You don't have to read too much into this...bottom line is God was validating the ministry of these eye-witness apostles by working through them in miraculous ways here in the early church and he was especially doing it here in a place where there was so much evil and the spiritual atmosphere was so rich.

Now, there are no more eye-witness apostles! So, when you hear a TV preacher saying he's going to send you a handkerchief in mail that he's prayed over and put it in the corner of your house, don't you dare send him any money. That handkerchief isn't going to do anything!

As we have seen in Acts, much of it is descriptive (talked about this last week) instead of prescriptive. This describes what was taking place in the early church...it's not meant to be the norm.

God was working in a special, unique way because this was a special and unique time as his church is being established at the hands of the apostles.

POWER in places like Ephesus spoke volumes. Remember this is home to magic and the occult. And forever, Satan had the power.

Now, Paul is on the scene preaching the gospel and performing miracles of all kinds...there is a new power they've never seen before and it seems to be overwhelming the old power! Paul's God is MORE powerful than the magic and incantations and spells they are used to!

Howard Marshall – “In a situation where people were gripped by superstition, perhaps the only way for Christianity to spread was by the demonstration that the power of Jesus was superior to that of demons...”

Illus. JP in India – pray for healing in the name of Jesus – so when Jesus heals them, they know exactly where it came from! Keep that in mind as we read this next story.

Acts 19:13-16 – “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 (Uh-oh! Power is being disrupted so much that the demons are starting to talk!), “Jesus I know (KNOW), and Paul I recognize (familiar with), but who are you?” (This is not a good day for these charlatans...and I say charlatans because they are traveling place to place probably taking advantage of people in small villages that don't know any better and moving one once they have done their deal...and their bad day is about to get worse here!)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.

The seven sons of Sceva are now the son stricking sons of Sceva...we laugh, but I want to emphasize here that the demonic is real.

It's nothing to play with! We don't see it manifest itself much like this here in the West, this sounds pretty weird to us, but in places all over the world that are like Ephesus...have welcomed in the occult and idol worship of all kind, I've seen with my own eyes demon possession...have it on film but won't show it because of children in the room and it's so disturbing!

This stuff happens! Demonic activity is more discreet here in the US I believe because Satan is no fool. We're lulled to complacency and sleep in our idolatry, why wake us up with a demon speaking to us or possessing someone.

Acts 19:17-20 – “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. (This is what it's all about! Miracles and might point to Jesus...make much of Jesus!)¹⁸ Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. (Notice what happens whenever someone gets saved and right with God...it may vary a little, but typically these things are present: There is conviction...there is confession...consecration – I'm yours, God!)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. (Commentators make a HUGE deal out of this...that represents more than 136 years of continuous labor with no days off – people had a book burning

and you are going to see next week how much this effected the almighty dollar in Ephesus and people didn't like it! The result though – v. 20) ²⁰ **So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.”**

As we bring this message to a close, let me give you some “so what” material. As we have seen today:

1. We struggle with real evil – (So What?) - Be Ready

What I mean by this is that we shouldn't be surprised when evil happens. Don't let it discourage you. Don't let it take you out of the game spiritually.

Evil is a part of the Fall of mankind and as a result we are going to deal with its effects every single day UNTIL God comes through on his promise (and he WILL come through on his promise) and rid the world of evil once and for all.

But until that time. We stand ready and prepared for whatever evil we may have to confront...and we do confront evil! We're not to simply sit back and let it happen, but instead as soldiers of the cross we war for justice and equity and fairness...and we stand with the poor, the widow and the orphan...the weak and the one who has no voice.

Be ready to ACT – to do righteousness and justice is better than sacrifice, the Proverb says.

2. We have a real enemy – (So what?) – Be Wise

What I mean by this is don't go looking for trouble. Satan is a powerful foe...and you don't need to go flirting with evil. Don't give the Enemy an inch because if you do, he will end up taking more, I promise you.

You don't need to fear him, but you do need to respect his power...and don't mess with him. Don't talk to Satan. You talk to Jesus and tell him to talk to him.

Illus. friend who dared Satan

That Eph. 6 passage says that he has “schemes” for each one of us...he's got a methodological approach to take us down...a target on each of our backs.

Illus. March Madness – watching film looking for weakness they can expose and take advantage of...this is what Satan does!

He's not like God...he's not all-knowing. He's a created being. But believe me, he and his demonic crew are paying attention to you and your life – he's watching film on you!

So, be wise and don't give him a foothold that could become a stronghold.

3. We are in a real war - (So What?) – Be Armed

In this war, God didn't leave us to fend for ourselves. Paul wrote the believers in Ephesus about the armor of God that we are to put on every day:

Eph. 6:13-18 – “Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints...”

The reality of evil and spiritual warfare. It exists. Let's stay close to Jesus and make sure were handling it in a way that honors him.

Let's pray.