

# Grace is Amazing

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Acts 19:23-41

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

*If you sense  
God is speak-  
ing into your  
life, say yes to  
God.*

A gift is not a gift unless it is opened. An invitation is not an invitation unless it is reciprocated.

God offers you a gift. But a gift is not a gift unless you receive it. God sends you an invitation. But an invitation is not an invitation unless you RSVP.

At the close of today's sermon, I will issue you an invitation. It's not my invitation. I am simply God's messenger in sharing this invitation with you. I won't call you down front or make a public spectacle of you. The invitation will be extended to you at your seat to say yes to God's gift of grace. If you sense God is speaking into your life, say yes to God.

We come today in our sermon series on the book of Acts to the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter. Paul's missionary journey brings him to the ancient city of Ephesus, home of the fabled temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Only the foundation of the temple and a few pillars remain today, but in its heyday, the temple was appointed with 127 marble pillars inlaid with gold. The goddess Artemis (Roman name Diana) was the daughter of Zeus, the mighty ruler of the Olympian gods. Following her birth, Artemis assists her mother in giving birth to her twin brother, Apollos. Artemis was venerated as the

patron saint of childbirth and the protector of young children. Pilgrims throughout the Roman Empire worshiped at her temple to pray for fertility and blessing. She was regarded as a type of ancient fertility doctor.

A cottage industry grows up around her shrine. Silversmiths fashion statuettes of this goddess and craft miniature silver replicas of her temple. These miniature temples are placed in the home as household shrines and serve as souvenirs to show friends and neighbors back home.

Paul preaches that God does not live in shrines made with human hands. He calls into question the worship of Greek gods and goddesses. Paul asserts there is one God and one expressed or image of God, Jesus Christ.

Paul's preaching may be good news for would-be disciples but becomes bad news for silversmiths. What use will people have for miniature silver temples and statuettes if this whole mythological enterprise is a hoax?

So Demetrius, representing Silversmith Union Local 186, steps forward to address his silversmith colleagues, "Men, you know we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number

***Paul's preaching has become bad for business.***

of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. There is a danger not only that this trade of ours will come into disrepute [meaning the market for souvenirs will dry up] but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis, who is worshipped throughout the world, will be scorned of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her" (19:25-27).

Although Demetrius expresses remorse that Artemis's temple will be denigrated, don't be deceived. Demetrius's driving concern is economic. Paul's preaching has become bad for business.

Missionary Hudson Taylor's preaching was bad for the opium business in China in the late 1800s. William Wilberforce's impassioned speeches in the House of Commons in 18th century England was bad for the West Indies slave trade business. Martin Luther King's preaching in the 1960s was bad for businesses that profited from segregation in America. The courageous witness of International Justice Mission workers in the 21st century is bad for the worldwide sex trade and human trafficking business. Are you aware that 27 million people are held against their wills in sweatshops and brothels around the globe? Sometimes the gospel is bad for business.

Demetrius's tirade successfully works his fellow silversmiths into a frenzied state. "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians," they shout (19:28, 34). This mob scene testifies to the power of economic self-

interest to excite a crowd. Throw a match into the dry cinders of economic uncertainty, and suddenly the whole city catches fire in a wave of panic. They take matters into their own hands by dragging two of Paul's companions into the amphitheater. It takes a stern warning by the town clerk and a garrison of soldiers to quell the disturbance.

Well, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Demetrius reminds me of people I've met through the years who get nervous about Jesus disrupting their lives. In the case of Demetrius, it has to do with money, but it could be most anything. If I let Jesus into my life, he will demand things of me. He will send me as a missionary to some far distant land or ask me to give up something I enjoy. Somehow he will crimp my style.

In his book *Christian Behavior*, C. S. Lewis writes about a school boy who was once asked what he thought God was like. He replied that, as far as he could tell, God was "the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if people are enjoying themselves and trying to put a stop to it."

For much of my early life, I could have been that school boy. I thought God wanted to curtail my fun. I imagined God to be some sort of cosmic killjoy, who, in Lewis's words, "is always snooping around to see if people are enjoying themselves and trying to put a stop to it."

I'm convinced most people don't really understand the Christian doctrine of grace. The belief that God's favor comes to us free of

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- Mark Twain

charge, no strings attached, cuts across the grain of every world religion. The Buddhist eightfold path, the Hindu doctrine of Karma, the five pillars of Islam and the Jewish understanding of law—all offer a way to earn God’s approval. Christianity is unique in this regard. We are loved by God, not because we merit divine favor but because God is exceedingly gracious.

Grace is counterintuitive to people. We have come to believe that everything in life has to be earned. People get pretty much what they deserve. Justice makes more sense to people than grace.

None of us really wants justice to decide our fate. We don’t want everything in life reduced to a precise system of rewards and punishments. When other people cut us off in traffic, we let fly with a few choice words to rail at their carelessness. But what happens when we cut people off in traffic? We expect people to cut us some slack. If truth be told, we want justice for everybody else but grace for us.

My primary job as a preacher isn’t to convince you of sin in your life. Experience has taught me that people already know far more than I ever will their guilt and shame. My chief mission is to convince you that you are loved and accepted by God because it’s in the nature of God to love this way.

Most people regard Christianity as a moral improvement plan. They think somehow it is up to them to earn God’s favor.

People tell me God will show them favor because they are basic-

ally good people. But precisely how good do you have to be? The Bible is emphatic on this point. If we are trying to earn God’s favor we will never be good enough.

Mark Twain had this to say about grace: “Heaven goes by favor. If heaven went by merit, we would be out and your dog would be in.” Mark Twain is hardly a poster child for Christianity, but his tongue-in-cheek comment finds its mark. Dogs exhibit many admirable traits. Dogs are loyal, trustworthy and forgiving; all the qualities we wish we could possess. If heaven is attained by favor, man’s best friend may be the more deserving.

God’s grace cannot be attained by human merit. Grace comes to us as a sheer gift. C. S. Lewis says it well: “God loves us, not because we are lovable, but because God is love.” We do not obey in order to be loved by God. Rather, God’s love and acceptance becomes our very impetus to obey.

In Acts 19:9, some of Paul’s listeners “stubbornly refused to believe.” The Greek word “stubborn” speaks of a heart hardened against God. The verb is written in imperfect tense, suggesting their hardening was a process. Over the course of Paul’s preaching, some people progressively hardened their hearts against God. When the truth of Jesus is repeatedly rejected, it hardens the heart.

People will sometimes say to me, “I just can’t believe the Bible; it is so full of errors.” Sometimes I’ll respond, “You know, that’s interesting. I’ve invested most of my life in studying the Bible, and one of

***... say yes to  
God.***

the things that strike me about the Bible is its accuracy. Could you show me one of those errors?"

Invariably, they will say something like, "Well, you know, I actually haven't read the Bible all that much." It turns out their objections are not intellectual, after all. Their objections are volitional. If truth be told, some people don't want God in their lives.

At the outset, I told you that I would close this sermon with an invitation. The invitation is not mine to give; the invitation originates with God and is mediated through Jesus Christ. Stop trying to earn God's approval. God invites us to respond to His exceedingly generous offer of grace. Open your life to what God offers you in Jesus Christ.

*Amazing Grace* was essentially an autobiographical hymn written by John Newton, once a captain on slave ships transporting Africans to work the sugar plantation fields of the West Indies. When Newton turned from his hardened ways to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ, he saw the slave trade for what it really was—a wretched business. He became a pastor and helped lead to faith William Wilberforce, who labored 40 years to abolish slavery in England. On his death bed, Newton was quoted to have said, "My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!"

This song has been endlessly recorded. The version we will sing adds a verse by Newton that most hymnals leave out, "The earth

shall soon dissolve like snow, the sun forbear to shine; but God who called me here below, will be forever mine."

If you sense today that God is speaking into your life, say yes to God.

