

Main Idea: By looking at the account of the Ephesian riot in Acts 19:23-41, we discover why people resist the message of Christ. It boils down to two fundamental problems.

- I. People resist Christ because of a heart problem (23-27).
  - A. The Ephesians loved their gold (23-25).
    1. You don't have to have money to love it.
    2. If you love money, you can't love God.
  - B. The Ephesians loved their god (26-27).
    1. By nature, we don't want to change.
    2. To be saved, we must be willing to be changed.
- II. People resist Christ because of a hearing problem (28-41).
  - A. If you love your sin, you won't listen to the truth (28-31).
    1. There was anger (28-29).
    2. There was no room for discussion (30-31).
  - B. If you won't listen to the truth, you will listen to lies (32-34).
    1. There was confusion (32).
    2. There was chaos (33-34).
  - C. If you keep listening to lies, you are in grave danger (35-41).
    1. There will be immediate consequences.
    2. There will be eternal consequences.

Make It Personal: What should we do when we face resistance?

1. Don't be surprised.
2. Pray fervently.
3. Remember that God will do what God alone can do.

Why do people resist Christ? Why is there such resistance to the person who so loved this world that He gave His life as a sacrifice on a Roman cross? This morning, as we return to the book of Acts, we'll discover the answer to that question.

*Scripture Reading: Acts 19:23-41*

John and Sally (not their real names) sat across the desk from me. They came because they were having trouble in their lives. I shared with them what I knew could bring them lasting hope, *the Word of God*. They listened intently and left. Later they came back to hear more and once more I presented to them the message of Christ. They returned again on another day, and again heard the Word. But then they stopped coming. When I called to find out why they had their reasons, but the bottom line was simply that they did not want to hear what the Bible had to say anymore.

I didn't share their names for two reasons. The first is obviously confidentiality. But the second reason, honestly, is that I wouldn't know which names to use. That scenario has happened many times. I've talked with lots of people over the years who showed initial interest in the Word, only later to dig in their heels and reject it.

You've faced it too, I'm sure. Think about the time you shared Christ with a family member or a neighbor or a fellow student. You tried to give them the most priceless gift you possess, the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, only to see a blank stare and hear the words, "That may work for you, but I'm not interested. Thanks, but no thanks."

Have you wondered recently why people resist Christ? If we're not thinking biblically about that question, we'll get discouraged and quit reaching out, as we ought. But if we are thinking biblically, it will encourage us to keep on proclaiming Christ even when we face initial rejection.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

What is the biblical perspective of that question? We find it right here in Acts 19. In Acts 19 the apostle Paul took the Word of God to Ephesus and great things began to happen. As a result of daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, discussions that lasted for two years, everybody who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (9-10). They *all* heard it. Did they all believe it? Many did. As we saw last time in Acts, many former sorcerers, after believing in Jesus, confessed their sin and burned up their magic scrolls, 50,000 drachmas worth (19).

But no, not everybody believed. Some who heard the same message resisted it. In fact, they became down-right hostile and caused a city-wide riot.

It's inevitable. Preach the gospel and two things will happen. Some will believe and change, but eventually, others will dig in their heels. And sometimes the latter group, since it can't disprove the message, will begin to attack the messengers.

Jesus predicted it would happen, and it does. Peter, John, James, and the rest of the twelve experienced it. So did Paul, everywhere he went, and perhaps nowhere more intensely than on this particular day in Ephesus.

By looking at the account of the Ephesian riot in Acts 19:23-41, we discover why people resist the message of Christ. It boils down to two fundamental problems.

#### I. People resist Christ because of a heart problem (23-27).

Jeremiah 17:9 states, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" "Men love darkness rather than light," Jesus said (John 3:19). People resist God's Word for a very basic reason. The Bible says they are dead in their sins (Eph 2:1) and dead people, apart from the gracious regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, won't respond. They *can't* respond. They are dead.

But don't assume that means they're passive in their deadness. They're not. Lost people refuse to love Christ because they already love something else. In fact, their hearts are enamored with all kinds of rival loves, two of which the Ephesians demonstrate for us in living color.

**A. The Ephesians loved their gold (23-25).** "About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: 'Men, you know we receive a good income from this business.'"

The story we're about to hear happened "about that time." What time? The time after Paul had taught the Word for two years and people started applying this Word to their lifestyles. That's the time.

The KJV says, "There arose no small stir about the way." Why? Because though interest in Jesus was up in Ephesus, the economy was down. People weren't buying idols like they used to, and one businessman decided to do something about it, a silversmith named Demetrius who spearheaded an assault.

The whole economy in Ephesus depended on idol worship. But since Paul came to town the economy went flat.

Artemis was the ancient mother goddess of Asia Minor and viewed by the people as the mother of gods and men. The Romans called her Diana (as in the KJV). There were at least 33 shrines to Artemis throughout the Roman Empire, making it likely the leading cult. Her temple at Ephesus was the centerpiece, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Her image was a grotesque figure that symbolized sexual fertility and her followers worshiped her by engaging in base and lewd practices.

Demetrius called together his fellow craftsmen for what amounted to a trade-union meeting. There was one item on the agenda. Verse 25—“Men, you know we receive a good income from this business.” Or rather, “We *used* to receive a good income.” But profits were down, who knows how much—15%, 25%, 50%?

When pilgrims came to Ephesus to worship Artemis, they would often buy a small replica for a take home souvenir. The silversmiths made these little shrines. They also made a lot of money doing it. I should say, they *used to* make a lot of money doing it. And that’s why they were hopping mad. They loved their *gold*.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “I sure don’t have that problem. I don’t even have any gold to love.” Hold on.

1. *You don’t have to have money to love it.* It’s not money that’s the root of all evil, but the *love of money* (1 Tim 6:10). So you can be living below the poverty line and have a heart that loves money as much as the gold-loving billionaire. And this too is true.

2. *If you love money, you can’t love God.* Jesus Himself said in Matthew 6:24, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”

One day a certain old, rich man of a miserable disposition visited a rabbi, who took the rich man by the hand and led him to a window. "Look out there," he said. The rich man looked into the street. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. "I see men, women, and children," answered the rich man. Again the rabbi took him by the hand and this time led him to a mirror. "Now what do you see?" "Now I see myself," the rich man replied.

Then the rabbi said, "Behold, in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is the silver added than you cease to see others, but you see only yourself."<sup>1</sup>

Here’s precisely why some people resist Christ, because of a heart problem. Their heart is infected with the same rival love that plagued Demetrius and the other businessmen in Ephesus, the love of gold.

Dear friend, when a person loves gold, they will not love Jesus. They can’t. Their heart is too crowded. “It’s hard,” said Jesus in Matthew 19:23, “for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Who then can be saved? That’s the very question the disciples asked. To which Jesus replied, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (26).”

We see a second false love in verses 26-27.

**B. The Ephesians loved their god (26-27).** Demetrius continued his speech, “And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

Demetrius is a shrewd fellow. He’s obviously in love with his money, and with the power and security that go with it. But it sounds way too selfish to admit that, so he covers up his greed with a religious cloak.

“If we don’t stop this Paul,” he says, “what will happen to our great goddess, Artemis? Poor thing! We’ve got to do something to help her. Why, it’s the right thing to do!”

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<sup>1</sup> Source Unknown.

The very argument shows the fallacy of idolatry. What good is a god that can't defend itself? Yet as weak as she was, the Ephesians loved their god.

In the late 1500's, Hideyoshi, a Japanese warlord who ruled over Japan, commissioned a colossal statue of Buddha for a shrine in Kyoto. It took 50,000 men five years to build, but the work had scarcely been completed when the earthquake of 1596 brought the roof of the shrine crashing down and wrecked the statue. In a rage Hideyoshi shot an arrow at the fallen colossus. "I put you here at great expense," he shouted, "and you can't even look after your own temple."<sup>2</sup>

These two adulterous loves are inseparable. The love of gold and the love of false gods have kept many people from loving the true and living God. Then and now.

To find out whether someone really loves the true God, just watch what happens when his bank account takes a dip. It's easy to give lip-service to a Jesus that makes life comfortable. Why, lots of people will flock to a church to worship that kind of Jesus.

But the real Jesus said this in Luke 9:23-24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

Granted, it costs *nothing* to receive Jesus, for salvation is a free gift that God gives to those who repent and put their total trust in Jesus. Jesus paid it all, by dying in the place of sinners on the cross, and then conquering death. But to be saved, the sinner must receive the real Jesus, the *Lord Jesus*. And when he does, Jesus changes things! And here's where the rubber meets the road.

1. *By nature, we don't want to change.* We love our gold. We love our false gods. We love our control. Yet...

2. *To be saved, we must be willing to be changed.* My friend, God doesn't ask you to change yourself, for we can't. Only Jesus can do that. Yet Jesus *will* do that. He will change you, and you must be willing, willing for the wise Potter to remold your sin-twisted life into His likeness.

You say, "What happens when He changes us?" To put it simply, He takes away things His Word prohibits, like greed, jealousy, and selfish habits. And He adds the things His Word commands, like generosity, a willingness to give, and service, because He knows this will result in our greatest joy and His greatest glory.

James Boice offers a helpful comment and illustration: "God often allows the ungodly to amass great wealth--to their destruction. But if you are one with whom God is dealing and if you put the pursuit of riches (or anything else) before service to Christ, God may take away those riches (and other things) until you turn to Him.

Some years ago Donald Grey Barnhouse was counseling a young woman on the sidewalk in front of Tenth Presbyterian Church following an evening service. She said she was a Christian and that she wanted to follow Christ. But she wanted to be famous too. She wanted to pursue a stage career in New York. "After I have made it in the theater, I'll follow Christ completely," she said. Barnhouse took a key out of his pocket and scratched a mark on a postal box standing on the corner. "That is what God will let you do," he said. "God will let you scratch the surface of success. He will let you get close enough to the top to know what it is, but He will never let you have it, because He will never let one of His children have anything rather than Himself."

Years later he met the girl again, and she confessed that this had indeed been her life story. She had dabbled in the stage. Once her picture had been in a national magazine.

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<sup>2</sup> [Today in the Word](#), MBI, August, 1991, p. 23.

But she had never quite made it. She told Barnhouse, "I can't tell you how many times in my discouragement I have closed my eyes and seen you scratching on that postal box with your key. God let me scratch the edges, but He gave me nothing in place of Himself."<sup>3</sup>

Why do people resist Christ? It's because of a heart problem. They love their gold and their god. Indeed, their gold often *is* the god they have made.

By the way, we learn a valuable lesson here about how to clean up a sinful society. Paul didn't boycott the silversmith shops, nor write letters to Rome to complain about the idolatry and immorality in Ephesus. Those weren't even options. He did something even more effective. He taught the Word daily and urged his converts to live for Christ. Then one by one the gospel took away the customers from the marketplace of sin.

It's easy for us to complain about the moral decay of our society, and that's a valid concern. But a greater cause for alarm is the moral decay of the *church*. What would happen if everybody who called themselves "Christian" in this country took steps daily to put to death our rival loves and replaced them with a growing love for the One who rescued us from hell? The church's task isn't to get unsaved people to clean up their act. It's to evangelize them. And we do that best when we show them how much more satisfying loving God is when compared with loving rival gods.

Just imagine if the 50% of Americans who call themselves "Christian" stopped watching television shows and going to movies that mock godliness and glorify sensuality. The pollsters would see the rating decline, you can be sure. And the sponsors would hear about it, and those shows would be history because money is the bottom line.<sup>4</sup>

Why that doesn't happen, as the polls substantiate, is because the entertainment choices of those who call themselves Christian *don't differ* significantly from the non-Christian audience. Apparently, we leave our convictions at the church door.

Kent Hughes is right, "It is impossible to be filled with the Spirit *and* watch a drama that feeds the base appetites of the flesh."<sup>5</sup>

So the question before us today is, "Why do people resist Christ?" The first answer, which we see in verses 23-27, is because there's a heart problem.

## II. People resist Christ because of a hearing problem (28-41).

The story is told of Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Nonplussed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."<sup>6</sup>

The world is full of people who have a hearing problem. Oh, their ears work just fine. It's just that they don't listen.

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<sup>3</sup> J.M. Boice, [Christ's Call To Discipleship](#), Moody, 1986, p. 154.

<sup>4</sup> As observed by K. Hughes, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> K. Hughes, p. 265.

<sup>6</sup> Source Unknown.

Why is it that people refuse to listen to the Word of God, even though the eternal destiny of their soul is at stake? The story in front of us gives us three important insights into this spiritual “hearing problem.”

**A. Insight #1: If you love your sin, you won’t listen to the truth (28-31).** Rival loves are like wax build-up in the ears. If a person loves sin, he won’t want to hear the Word of God. Indeed, He won’t be able to hear it. This was certainly true for the unbelieving businessmen in Ephesus. Notice two responses.

1. *There was anger (28-29).* “When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater.”

After listening to Demetrius’ speech, the Silverworkers’ union members started shouting their devotion to Artemis. A mob gathered and rushed into the theater, the largest public building in Ephesus (the remains of this 25,000 seat theater still exist today).

It didn’t take much effort to get a crowd that day, for good reason. Every year in the spring people from all over flocked to Ephesus for the Artemis festival. Hughes describes this celebration as “a month of debauchery during which pilgrims came from everywhere to participate in athletic contests, drink, carouse, and have a ritual fling with prostitutes.”<sup>7</sup> It seems the riot took place at this festival in the year AD 55.

Why did they grab Gaius and Aristarchus? Apparently, the mob couldn’t find Paul so they grabbed the next best thing, his associates. Anger causes people to do crazy things.

2. *There was no room for discussion (30-31).* “Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.”

I’m challenged by Paul’s courage. He wasn’t kidding when he later said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24, “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

But fearlessness comes close to folly at times. Though Paul wanted to address this problem face-to-face, the disciples knew the hostile crowd would tear him to pieces and persuaded him to stay away. In 1 Corinthians 15:32 Paul said he “fought wild beasts in Ephesus.” He may have had this day in mind, the day when he saw firsthand insight #1, *if you love your sin, you won’t listen to the truth.*

**B. Insight #2: If you won’t listen to the truth, you will listen to lies (32-34).** The mob certainly did. As the story unfolds two things happened.

1. *There was confusion (32).* “The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.”

Ben Franklin said a mob is “a monster with heads enough, but no brains.” One person who won’t listen to the truth is dangerous. Put a bunch of them together and you’ve got a time bomb ready to explode. It was mass confusion, and it got worse.

2. *There was chaos (33-34).* “The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’”

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<sup>7</sup> Kent Hughes, pp. 263-4.

Apparently, the Jews wanted to make sure the Ephesians knew the Jews had no part in the ministry of Paul. So they sent Alexander to the podium to make the point. But when the crowd saw him, they went ballistic knowing that the Jews likewise condemned idol worship.

At that point, all semblance of reason left the arena and the mob started screaming, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians! Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” For two straight hours they yelled. Ignorance causes people to do irrational things, doesn’t it?

If you love your sin, you won’t listen to the truth. If you won’t listen to the truth, you will listen to lies. Thirdly...

**C. Insight #3: If you keep listening to lies, you are in grave danger (35-41).**

Even the pagan CEO of Ephesus understood that. In verse 35 Luke says the “city clerk” stepped forward and quieted the crowd. This man was the most important local official in the city. Listen to his speech:

“Men of Ephesus, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today’s events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.’ After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.”

There’s no reason to believe this man was a Christian. Even unregenerate people, however, understand this principle. If you keep listening to lies, you are in grave danger. What kind of danger? There are two types.

*1. There will be immediate consequences.* That’s what the city clerk had in mind. This government official was the man who kept the public records, the modern equivalent being the mayor. Correspondence to Ephesus was addressed to him. That’s why he intervened, as Barclay suggests, “If there were riots in any town Rome would know the reason why and the magistrates responsible might lose their positions. He saved Paul and his companions, but he saved them because he was saving his own skin.”<sup>8</sup>

Even pagans, because of common grace, can live in civility. It’s in their best interest to do so. According to Romans 13:4 the government is God’s servant, without which there would be total anarchy in this world.

So God used a pagan clerk to accomplish His purposes in Ephesus. Today, if He so chooses, God can use a senator or a school board member to pass policy, or a Supreme Court judge to overturn policy—even unregenerate senators, board members, and judges—so that the gospel has freedom to advance.

Something the clerk said is worth a second look. “These men...have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.” That indicates Paul didn’t build the church by attacking the opposition. He simply preached the Word of God, knowing that its truth would take care of the false, opposing religions and beliefs. And it did. Have you met any worshipers of Artemis recently? And yet there are millions worldwide who worship and would be willing to die for Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Barclay, p. 147.

If you listen to lies there will be immediate consequences. Satan is still promoting his lies. “You have a right to do whatever you choose with your body” is one of his lies. “You have a right to choose your own gender identity” is another. “There is no such thing as absolute truth” is a lie. And if you listen to these lies there will be consequences, spiritually, emotionally, and often physically.

But worse than that, if a person keeps listening to lies...

2. *There will be eternal consequences.* Jesus said in John 5:24, “I tell you the truth, *whoever hears my word* and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.” Who receives eternal life? Those who *hear* the Word well and believe in the One who spoke it receive eternal life. Conversely, those who resist the Word and the One who gave it, those who *refuse to hear* the only message of salvation will experience everlasting death. They will not pass from death to life. They will be condemned forever.

Yes, there are eternal consequences for refusing to listen to the truth.

So this is why people resist Christ. It boils down to a *heart problem*. They refuse to love Christ because they already love something else, gold and rival gods.

And the heart problem evidences itself with a *hearing problem*. Because they love their sin, they refuse to listen to the truth and would rather believe in lies, lies that will result in grave danger.

I’m not describing a few people. I’m describing the condition of *every* person from birth, including you and me. We are born with a heart problem and a hearing problem. Thankfully, the Great Physician specializes in renewing hearts and opening deaf ears.

I remember when I first started talking with a person whose heart was distracted by other loves and his ears resisted the truth of God’s Word. I watched as the battle raged. And as I continued to watch, I saw the Sovereign Lord use His powerful Word to bring this person to repentance, and saw this fellow descendant of Adam place his faith in Jesus Christ. I watched as a miracle occurred. I saw a person who now had a new heart and ears that loved the Word of God!

Who is that person? Actually, it’s not one person. It’s many people in this church family. It’s really the story of every born again child of God.

Is it your story? Has God performed surgery on your heart and ears? Humble yourself before Him today, trust in Christ, and He will do the same for you. One final question...

#### Make It Personal: What should we do when we face resistance?

Exhibit three simple responses.

1. *Don’t be surprised.* Why are we surprised that people with crowded hearts and calloused ears resist the gospel we share? It’s what we once did, isn’t it?

2. *Pray fervently.* Call upon the Lord in behalf of the spiritually dead. Ask God to give them new hearts and ears that hear.

3. *Remember that God will do what God alone can do.* God will save sinners. And God will make sure His work continues, no matter how firm the resistance.

**Closing Song:** “O Come, All Ye Faithful” #145 all three verses